

CHAPTER ONE

THE EARLY HISTORY OF MEQELE REGION

1.1. TRADITION AND THE RELIGIOUS SETTLEMENT OF MEQELE LOCALITY

Northern Ethiopia, more specifically the province of Tigray, the whole of the Eritrean plateau and the coastal settlement was the center of the Christian kingdom during the Aksumite period. After the decline of Aksum, the centers of both the church and the state shifted southward to the region of southern Tigre and Angot.¹ The region of *Iaderta* was part and parcel of the developments taking place in the Christian kingdom. Written sources mention the region of *Iaderta* as one of the Christian territories during the Zagwe dynasty (c.1150-1270). The same written sources also mention that *Iaderta* and its rulers had a powerful influence in the province of Tigray during the first years of the Solomonic dynasty.²

According to Taddesse Tamrat "The thirteenth century ushered in a period of active development affecting both church and state in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia".³ As is widely known, until the fifteenth century the cultural center of the Ethiopian church still remained in Tigray. This period is characterized by the emergence of two powerful trends in the Ethiopian church, i.e. the house of Teklebaïmanyan and the house of Ewostatewos. And at least in the second half of the fourteenth century one of the centers of the followers of Ewostatewos was the region

Tradition tells us that Abune Ewostatewos was born and brought up in Geralta where he later established the monastic community of Dabra Isra. This area is very close to the region of Indera and the influence of the house of Ewostatewos was very strong. The same tradition tells us that one of the prominent followers of Ewostatewos, Abba Absadi, was active in Indera in general and the locality of Meqele in particular.² To what extent this religious activity influenced the emergence of settlements in the area is a little explored question. But it is widely known that settlements usually emerged alongside religious centers. Mainly in the Amhara and Tigrinya-speaking areas.³

In this regard there is a popular tradition which attributes to the period of Seyfe Arad (1344-71) the foundation of monastic communities in the locality of the present day Meqele. It relates that Abba Absadi came in Meqele and used to live in the place where the present Medhani Alem church is found. He was said to have established a monastic site in the area and accompanied by a few followers (Abune Abraham and Abune Teklehaimanot) pursued a life of strict asceticism. The fact that inaccessible hill sides and forest areas were most popular as sites of young monastic communities⁴ must have led Abba Absadi to choose the fertile and forest hill of Meqele as an ideal place of seclusion.

As is common with the famous monks, stories of astounding miracles were built around his name which says "he prayed and as a result holy waters sprang in the area".⁵ Of course the place was endowed with more than ten streams and it was suitable place for religious activity. At first the small community lived a very simple life by gathering wild fruits for their daily needs but gradually the community got bigger. They built a small church of Mikael and about five huts around it.⁶

The name Meqele itself is attributed to Abba Absadi. Oral sources narrate that the students of Abba Absadi used to visit the surrounding communities to gather food. All of them frequented the same houses and the inhabitants of the area were fed up and began to complain. Hearing this Abba Absadi divided the villages and assigned his students to different settlements, as a result of which the word "he divided" (in Tigrigna is called Meqele) emerged.¹¹ There is also another similar version for the emergence of the word Meqele. Abba Absadi had religious opponents in the area. While discussing with them he is reported to have said "whether I am wrong or right will be proven by these Daro trees" (oak), of which the trees near his opponents were broken in to two. The words broken and divided into two have similar meaning in Tigrigna.¹²

There is no written confirmation of the above traditions. Both Tadesse and Ellero, however, state that Abba Absadi died at Meqele and was buried there.¹³ My informants on the other hand are unanimous that after a short stay in Meqele Abba Absadi and his followers left the area and went to different places.¹⁴ In any case whatever the causes for the emergence of the word Meqele might have been, it is associated with the religious activities of Abba Absadi. As a result Abba Absadi's monastic life in the area could possibly be taken as the beginning of a religious settlement = Meqele.

Shortly after the departure of Abba Absadi a few houses were built above the religious site in the present day village of Indayesus and gradually some huts emerged to the south-east, south-west and north-west of the religious site.¹⁵ The places were called Almalem, Mai Gifaf and Inda Gabir, respectively. The area surrounding the religious site was covered by forest and most of the place names were derived after the

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streams. Of these Mai Lihani to the left, Mai Degene to the south, Mai Gifal to the south-west and Gereb Bubu to the east are noted.¹⁶ Although it is difficult to give exact dates, since informants simply say around four hundred years ago, there were villages called Inda Yesus and Ainaleni (above the hill of Inda Yesus) and the places called Mai Lihani, Gonal Daro, Mai Gifaf, Gereb Tsedo, Gereb Buhu, Gira kolel and Mai Degene to the south of the hill.¹⁷

The above-mentioned villages and places were collectively known as Meqele. And the place above the hill was later called Dog'a Meqele (highland Meqele) and that below the hill Qola Meqele (lowland Meqele). (see fig. n.1). Informants revealed that even after the departure of Abba Absadi the religious site, which was located in the middle of the hill, remained a place of private retreat to holy men and monks in the words of Membir Gebregiorgis Gebremedhin "Ye Bahiawiyan Subaye Megbia".¹⁸

Again from oral tradition we learn that during the reign of king Dawit (1328-1411) there came a change over the name and the status of the religious site of Meqele. It is stated that a piece of the wood of the True Cross (Gimade Mesqel) was brought from Jerusalem and stayed for about forty days in the religious site of Meqele on its way to Gishen. And at the site where the piece of the True Cross made a temporal stay, the ark of the cross was planted for remembrance; hence, the area came to be called Inda Mesqel.¹⁹ Still there is no written confirmation of this tradition. Whether the ark of the cross was really planted there by king Dawit or whether the elders of the area simply created legends to associate themselves with the ~~Solomonic~~ kings is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the name Inda Mesqel, as noted above, still survives as the name of the area.

The same sources said that in the last quarter of the seventeenth century a holy man called Abba Anenya died in the present day piazza of Meqele town, where shortly a holy water sprang, as a result of which the place came to be known as Inda Abba Anenya. The only written confirmation of the above tradition is the Gradle Abba Anenya found in the present Medhani Alem church of Meqele.²⁰ However, later developments clearly show that the holy water of Abba Anenya was to become a place of ritual ceremonies throughout the nineteenth century up to the Italian period.²¹ And still the name of Inda Abba Anenya applied to the central area of the town. Meqele's identification with Abba Absadi, the church of Inda Mesqel and later with the religious place of Inda Abba Anenya strongly indicate that Meqele had its genesis and development as a religious place beginning from the fourteenth century.

Before the nineteenth century we know very little of the type of development that took place in Meqele. Towards the first decade of the nineteenth century, however, a new development took place around the locality of Meqele and the whole of Inderta region. The rise of the son of Dejazmach Kifleyesus of Inderta, Raj Woldesillasie, led to the establishment and growth of many centers in the region.²² The most prominent were Hintalo and Cheleqot. We have some travellers accounts about this period. Of these travellers Henry Salt and his companions, Pearce and Coffin, have left us vivid accounts of the socio-economic and religious life of the area

These travellers who visited the area in the first years of the century state that the ras used to frequent Hintalo, Cheleqot and Meqele. Pearce wrote that "the ras amused himself by changing his residence every twenty days or month, to his favourite towns and country seats i.e. Hintalo, Chaleqot, Meqele, Felleq Daro and Giba".²³ But

Giba and Feleg Daro were less frequented by the ras than the other towns. The written sources also indicate that the ras considered Hintalo as a political capital, Cheleqot (with its celebrated church of Sillasié which the ras had built) as a religious center and Meqele as a place of recreation.²⁴

The ras spent most of his holidays at Meqele, which had then a sizable population and a fascinating topography.²⁵ Again the same sources indicate that the ras used to attend the religious ceremonies held in the site of Inda Abba Anenya in Meqele town. The day of Abba Anenya, which took place on meskerem 11, was attended by the ras and by many people gathered from different places. Solemn prayers were made by a large group of priests coming from all over Inderta. It was also attended by a large feast and horse riding with the presence of all the troops of the ras.²⁶

According to Pearce, "thousands flock, [to the sacred spot] to be cured of their diseases even from Gondar and Adwa. "He further states that" the altar was brought according to yearly custom, from the hill of the church yasous and the sacrament administered to those who wished to receive it"²⁷ The above report is confirmed by the oral sources. Hence it is possible to assume that by the nineteenth century Meqele with its celebrated churches and ritual sites was not only a secluded place of monks but had a significant religious importance to the area in general. Again from the above discussion it can be safely argued that the religious site of Inda Mesqel was considered as a secluded holy place and the convenient religious house for the secular clergy was the church of Inda Yesus.²⁸

According to informants the ras also used to frequent the villages of Inda Yesus (in Doga Meqele) which was also the birth place of his mother. It is also reported that he renovated the church of Inda Yesus.²⁹ Lord Valentia on his part mentions that there was a large church on the top of Meqele and it was there that he met the ras. Both the written accounts of the travellers and the oral sources confirm that the ras attended the usual Friday's repast at Meqele.³⁰ Apart from its religious significance and its being the birth place of his mother, the ras seems to have been much attracted by the natural beauty of the Meqele area; he spent most of his time there hosting guests, hearing litigation and giving trials.³¹

Lord Valentia also witnessed that in one of the funerals at Meqele no less than 10,000 persons had been assembled.³² Given the fact that funerals were attended by many people from different places it is hard to take the number as indicating exclusively the inhabitants of Meqele. Salt further states that the game called Qarsa (similar to golf) was frequented and in one instance one half of Meqele area was hotly engaged in it.³³ Since such games were attended by a sizable number of young men Meqele must have been a large settlement. But the above written accounts failed to give us the exact location of the settlements as well as the area of village activities. Besides, since the name Meqele applied to a vast area comprising various place names and settlement sites, it is difficult to identify Meqele's main settlement of the time. Nevertheless, from the facts collected by the oral sources the main settlements of the Meqele locality must have been the villages located in Doga Meqele, the earliest villages of Indayesus and

Amalem.³⁴

The centers in Inderta suffered greatly after the death of their patron Ras Woldeasilasie in 1816, and soon waned in importance. This is particularly true of Hinialo and Cheleqot which were badly affected by the chaos that followed and were overshadowed by Adigrat, a new political center established by Dejazmach Sibagadis of Agame. Nevertheless the area, as the main place of salt transportation, continued to benefit from the salt trade (which will be dealt with extensively in the coming chapters) and Hinialo was able to survive for the coming decades as an important market center.³⁵

From this period until the close of the nineteenth century we know very little about Meqele. Nevertheless documents of Emperor Tewedros record that it paid taxes to that monarch in the 1860's. According to the document Meqele was one of the twenty-two ambas of Inderta. Indeed what is important here is that Meqele used to pay an amount of tax equal to that paid by the three large settlements of Feleg Daro, Igri Womber and Shibua combined.³⁶ This will suggest that Meqele had a large settlement and a sizable population. But it is not clear whether Meqele was only a religious center or whether it was a large town with a trading or caravan post. Our sources, however, only tend to indicate that Meqele until the close of the nineteenth century remained a religious settlement.

Towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century a new development of far reaching significance for Meqele emerged with the rise of Kassa Mircha (later Emperor Yohannis) of Tigray. Yohannis built a church which soon became a gedam in Meqele; later he made it his political center.

1.2. Meqele As A Gedam

While Meqele, was noted for the church of Inda Yesus and Inda Mesqel since the fourteenth century, it is during the reign of Emperor Yohannis that it became important. That Kassa Mircha's influence was felt in the locality of Meqele appears to be confirmed not only by local tradition but also through some written accounts which indicate that in his rebel days Kassa spent most of his time there.³⁷ Again from oral tradition we learn that Kassa had made a vow that if his campaigns were successful he will build a church in Meqele. And it could be in line with the above promise that he gave orders for the construction of a church at Meqele two years before his coronation as king of kings.³⁸ The chronicle of the emperor also seems to confirm this.

According to the chronicle of Emperor Yohannis collected by Bairu Tafila, shortly after his victory over Emperor Teklegiorgis on July 11, 1871, Kassa went to Raya and Azebo to crush rebellious chiefs and on his return to Adwa he passed through Meqele on December 1, 1871 to see the erection of his church built in the name of the Saviour of the World.³⁹ From the above statement we can safely argue that before 1871 Kassa must have given orders for the construction of the church at Meqele. The same tradition as well as the chronicle tells us that Kassa also installed the ark of Kidane Mihret and gave both church the necessary holy goods.⁴⁰ Informants however tend to suggest that it was about 1873 that the work of construction for the church of Kidane Mihret began.⁴¹

The Church of Kidane Mihret was constructed over the hereditary land of his mother, Sillias, and it was finished in 1875.⁴² Both the written and oral sources further

state that the emperor set up regulations, according to which it was decided that Medhani Alem church become a gedam of monks and kidana Mihret as a nunnery. The gedam of Medhani Alem was erected near the old church of Inda Mesqel while the religious site of Inda Mesqel came to an end.⁴³

Kassa seems to have been very much attracted by the beauty of the site, hence, he called it Debre Genet Medhani Alem. The visit of Kassa is recorded by his chronicler who claims that the country around the church was "exactly like paradise and had sweet water pouring out of the springs on its right and left, and front and back at all times". It thus "deserved to be named Debre Genet", i.e. Mount of paradise, and "the head of all cathedrals."⁴⁴ Hence forth, the settlement came to be called Meqele Debre Genet Medhani Alem instead of Inda Mesqel. Since then and mainly after the emperor established his political center around 1876, Meqele appears to have been not only a growing settlement but also a religio-administrative center of the locality.

Until very recently Meqele was called Debre Genet Medhani Alem. Before it became a growing urban center under the name of Meqele, Debre Genet Medhani Alem continued to be a gedam extending its jurisdiction over the administration and the socio-economic life of the town. We have very little exact information about the early years of the gedam but there is a popular tradition that on its foundation the gedam was endowed by the emperor with substantial gull land.⁴⁵ The eight gull lands allocated to the gedam were located outside the town area. The gedam also received two third of the 10% from the income of the Berrable salt customs post and had full jurisdiction over the market dues of Meqele, tollgate fees and in judging property conflicts and extracting tribute from the people.⁴⁶

What kind of religio-administrative role the gedam had in the town in the period under investigation may be explained by examining the administrative hierarchy of the gedam. The gedam was run by officials entitled the aleqa or melake genet, the merigeta, and eight lige diagonat which run twenty rim-holders each under them. The melake genet who was appointed for life by the emperor and later the rases and dejazmach, was the head of the gedam as well as the town for all administrative, judicial (except in cases of homicide), spiritual, educational, social and economic affairs. He was entitled to the titles of azaz, feraj, gerach and aday. According to informants he was like the municipality head of modern towns.⁴⁷ Meqele was thus the seat of administration for the parish of Debre Genet Medhani Alem. The merigeta and the lige diagonat were his assistants who closely supervised the distribution of land, administration, collection of tributes as well as toll-gate and market dues.⁴⁸

At this point we come to a crucial and distinctive characteristic of eighteenth and nineteenth century Ethiopian towns. Not only did Meqele possess a market, and act as an administrative center, but it also had at least three endowed churches which constituted one gedam (the church of Medhani Alem, Kidane Mihret and Tekle Haimanot).⁴⁹ The role of the church in education is already known. However, far more crucial for our discussion is the role played by the church in the social formation as a whole which affected the growth of settlements in the town.

At the early stage of the life of the gedam, about fifteen priests came to serve in the church and settled around the gedam. The emperor appointed a prominent religious person, Lige Woldemesus, as the aleqa (melake genet) of the gedam. He was from Inda Yesus (Dog'a Meqelet). The aleqa brought with him fourteen priests and

gradually many deberas and deacons came from the surrounding villages and settled around the gedam.⁵¹ When he founded the gedam the emperor had worked out a regulation which stated "the gedam will be served by one hundred sixty-five imholders". Of these sixty were priests, forty deacons and sixty deberas, and the remaining five were called nay bilda. Even the emperor, all his relatives and the mekwarint were im holders and served the church by hiring priests and deacons.⁵² The clergy settled around the church of Medhani Alem and Kidane Mihret in a place called Mai Liham. They formed the first sizable node of settlement in the town. It seems to have been for this reason that Crumney gave special importance to religious centers, particularly gedam and dabir churches, as important points of agglomeration "inspecific ways that fostered urbanization".⁵³

As a result Mai Liham, sometimes called kahinat Sefer, was the early sefer of Meqele town. This ecclesiastical community of the kahinat included monks, priests, deberas and deacons. Besides, there were also other people who joined the gedam to seek solitude and some others who came to look for asylum as the gedam was known for its hospitability and protection.⁵⁴ According to informants, during the time of Emperor Yohannis there were about twelve farmers who built houses in Mai Liham close to the hill of Chom'a. Like the kahinat they lived on gedam land called Debre Genet Medhani Alem Mahiber Meret. Besides church services they lived by tilling agricultural lands found to the east and north-east of the town.⁵⁴ Oral sources indicate that the emperor always used to tell the people who built their houses to the north-east of Medhani Alem church and near the hill to shift to the center of the town and build

their houses in the plain near the future site of the palace. But most of them declined on the ground that they did not want to live together with the owners of the *mesheta* houses.³⁵

Thus, until the establishment of the palace and the market and the emergence of political and trade-oriented settlements, the *kahinat sefer* of Mai Liham was to remain the most important and largest settlement of Meqele town. There were also some houses in the areas between the Medhani Alem church and the present day church of Giorgis to the south of it. Informants also state that even before the beginning of the actual palace construction in 1881, some lesser officials of the emperor started to build houses around the palace which later became a large quarter of the *mekwanint*.³⁶ As a result we can say that until the mid-1880's, Meqele was predominantly a *gedam* settlement. And at this level of its development, Meqele did not constitute ■ important town comparable to Hintalo, Adwa or Soqota.

FOOT NOTES

¹Taddesse Tamrat, Church and State In Ethiopia, 1270-1527 (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 53 and 107, Steven Kaplan, The Monastic Holy man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia 1270-1468 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1984), p. 23.

² Taddesse, p. 107, Kaplan, p. 51.

³ Taddesse, p. 19.

⁴Taddesse, p. 156, Kaplan p. 38 and 51; Informants, Gebregiorgis Gebremedhin, Sertsedingil Arafayne

⁵Ibid.

⁶Donald Crummev, "Some Precursors of Addis Ababa: Towns in Christian Ethiopia i the 18th and 19thc in Proceedings of the International Symposium on the Centenary of Addis Ababa (Addis Ababa University, 1987), p. 10 and 38.

⁷Giovanni Ellero, "Note Sull "Enderia" in Rassegna di Studi Etiopici, anno I (1941), pp. 157-8; Informants: Gebregiorgis, Sarsedingil, Liul Gebretakle. Woldeyohannis Gebremedhin. All the oral sources stated that Abba Absadi came from Debre Tsira in Ger'alta.

⁸Taddesse, p. 110; Informant Sertsedingil, Birhane Kassa.

⁹Informants: Gebregiorgis, Girmay Meresa, Bayru Halefom, Hilu Gebresalasie. Although there were many ancient streams in the area the oral sources tend to give credit to Abba Absadi.

¹⁰All the oral sources mention that Abba Absadi built a church of Mikael in the site but there is no mention of such a church in subsequent years.

¹¹Informants: Zesilasie Gebremariam, Hagos Gebremedhin, Sertsedingil

¹²Informants: Bayru, Hadara, Heilu. Others also stated that when Abba Absadi left the area his followers asked him to divide the Daro trees among them, which he did and as a result of which the name Meqele came into use. This is also stated by Ellero but most of the informants confirm the first version

¹³Taddesse, p. 208; Ellero, p. 157; however informants stated that Abba Absadi died in Akele Guzay.

¹⁴Bayru, Sertsedingil, Gebregiorgis Tradition tells us that Abba Absadi went to Akele Guzay Dabra Mariam, Abba Abraham went to Kokolo, and Abba Teklehaimanot to Qata (near Meqelet) and established the gedam of Mai Ambusa.

¹⁵Ibid

¹⁶There were more than ten streams in the area and most of the sites were named after them. They were Mai Lihem, Mai Fikir, Mai Tigabu, Mai Anisil, Mai Alini, Mai Batail, Mai Gereh Bubu, Mai Ungulle, Mai kuakual, Mai Saida Igam, Mai Degene, Mai Gifaf, Mai Gereb Tsedo, Mai Wadigane.

¹⁷According to the oral sources Inderta region was administered by two brothers called Hehaletson and Bagdatsion who came from Hamasien. The area was their "qignj". Later during the reign of Libna Dingil, Bagdatsion ruled the area and during the time of Fasilades his son dej Asherom subdivided Inderta into 22 ambas of which Meqele was one. Later in the 19th the tax records of Emperor Tewodros also mentioned Meqele as one of the 22 tax-paying ambas of Inderta.

¹⁸Informants Settsedingil and Zesilasie also shared the idea. Written sources, such as Agrarih in Iwaq, Meqele 1980, p. 10; Ye Meqele Debre Genet Medhani Alem Betekristian Tarikawi Ameseraret p. 2 unpublished documents prepared by Tigray Sports and Culture Department, also agree with the oral sources. Another unpublished material written by the elders of Meqele in 1983 and entitled Meqele ka 1900-1928, p. 1, also shares the above idea.

¹⁹All informants mentioned that King Dawit himself brought the piece of the True Cross to the area and planted the ark of the cross there. Unpublished material found in the municipality of Meqele and entitled Ye Tinantinawa Inda Mesqel Ye Zarewa Meqele, p. 5, also narrates the same story. W. Budge, A History of Ethiopia, Nubia and Abyssinia (Ostrabout: The Netherlands Anthropological Publications, 1966) also mentions that in the reign of David a piece of the wood of the True Cross was brought to Abyssinia from Jerusalem. We do not have any other written confirmation about this.

²⁰Gedle Abba Anenya, p. 54. Some informants however, said that Abba Anenya died in Derg'ajen at a place called Hilisha and his body made a temporary stay at the site on its way to Qata (to the east of Meqele).

²¹Nathaniel Pearce, The Life and Adventures of Nathaniel Pearce, (London: Henry Colburn Richard Bentley, 1831), p. 133. Informants Gebregiorgis, Zesilasie etc. further stated that the Italians built a road over the source of the water

²²Ibid; p. 101. Henry Salt, A Voyage to Abyssinia and Travels in the Interior of that Country, (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1967), p. 56 and 260-61.

²³Salt, p. 305; Pearce, p. 45; Feleg Daro is located in the north east Giba in the east and Hinialo and Cheleqot to the south of Meqele.

²⁴Nathaniel, p. 101; Henry, p. 115. According to informants the ras on his way from Meqele to Hinialo saw a tree and, much attracted by it, asked the people about the name of the tree and they told him it was called qot. Then the ras said chelle ("very good" in Inderta) qot, hence, the area became known as Cheleqot.

²⁵Pearce, p. 279. Henry, p. 65.

²⁶Ibid, Salt, p. 115. Informants also shared the idea.

¹¹Ibid. Pearce, pp. 133-137

¹²Sertsedingil, Gebregiorgis, Zesilasie.

¹³Most of the oral sources stated that the ras visited Meqele at least once every two weeks. And still the dry weather road from Meqele to Cheleqot bears the name "Mengedi Rasi i.e. the Ras's road.

¹⁴George V. Valentia, Voyages and Travels to India, the Red Sea, Abyssinia and Egypt in the years 1802-1806 volume two (London: W. Bulmer and Co. Cleveland, 1809), p. 117, Zesilasie, Hiluf, Toklu.

¹⁵Pearce, pp. 54-56, Sertsedingil

¹⁶Valentia, p. 117

¹⁷Ibid., p. 376.

¹⁸Sertsedingil, Hadera, Qalekristos Abay.

¹⁹Richard Pankhurst, History of Ethiopian Towns: From the Middle Ages to the Early Nineteenth Century (Wiesbaden Steiner, 1985), p. 210.

²⁰Germasillasie Asfaw and Ricahrd Pankhurst, Tax Records and Inventories of Emperor Tewodros of Ethiopia 1855-1868 (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1979), p. 81. The tax-paying ambas mentioned in the document were as follows: Dargagan, Kuhan, Igri Hariba, Meqele, Feleg Daro, Igri Womber and Shibta, Upper Gambela, lower Gambela, Qata, Debri, Gabat, Hawseba, Dediba, Manos, Adi Aqaiti and Maramiti. Meqele used to pay 25 dollars of the tax, 25 of the negarit, 9 dollars of the bel (in amharic Yebilu) of the mashomiya 10 dollars, of frida 12 and of honey 12.

²¹Zawde GebreSillasie, Yohanis IV of Ethiopia: A Political Biography (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 46; Seltene Seyoum, "Yohanis IV: Rise and consolidation" B.A. thesis in history (Addis Ababa University, 1972), p. 15. All the written sources about the rebellion of Kassa Mircha show that his movement was centered in Inderta and the adjacent Afar lowlands.

²²Sertsedingil, Taklu Gebresillasie, Zesilasie.

²³Bairu tafla (ed.), A Chronicle of Emperor Yohanis IV, 1872-89 (Wiesbaden: Franze Steiner, 1977), p. 121

²⁴Ibid., Sertsedingil, Gebregiorgis, Liuf

²⁵Almost all of my informants stress that the church of Kidane Mihret was constructed after two years and that of Tekle Haymanot after seven years of Yohanis's coronation as king of kings.

⁴⁵Alberto Shacchi. "The Late Robert L. Hess and the Memoirs of Giacomo Naretti at the Court of Emperor Yohannis in Ethiopia" in The papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Michigan State University, 1994 (Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press Inc., 1994), p. 912

⁴⁶Informants: Gebregiorgis, Zesilasie

⁴⁷Bairu, p. 123.

⁴⁸Sensesidingil, Gebregiorgis, Woldeyohanis, Birhane and others. The gult lands were located in Mai Gifaf, Adi Shum Dihun, Ilkin, Ger'alta (Tikur), Sabat Titar, Dur Ambasa, Waza, Herego and Alaesa (in Tembien)

⁴⁹The discussion is confirmed by all the oral sources.

⁵⁰Bayru, Balay, Zesilasie.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid

⁵³Ibid: Gebregziabihir Hailu, Gesese Bazabih, Mir'af Abay. They Kahinat came from the villages of Ainelem, Indayesus, Adi Shum Dihun and Adi Welel. According to the chronicler of Emperor Yohannis, the emperor appointed over the churches of Meqele Lige Woldeyasus for he was a knowledgeable and famous scholar.

⁵⁴The Worgi Wonjel is found in Kidane Mihret church. According to informants the five rim's called nay bilda were assigned to those who served the church on special occasions and holidays as well as to the antafi and atikilt atachi. Informants failed to tell us the origin of the name-bilda. The chewa mekwanini used to hire deacons for 5.00 birr monthly. The presence of mekwanini rim-holders was also considered as helping to protect the gedam and add prestige to it.

⁵⁵Crummey p. 40

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 8; Merid Wolde Aregay. "Gondar and Adwa: A Tale of two Cities", 8th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (Addis Ababa University, 1984), p. 61.

⁵⁷Zarai Tella, Kindeya Alamu, Zesilasie, Liul, Berhane

⁵⁸Some informants said that later in the 1920's, most of the farmers regretted their earlier decision and changed their mind

⁵⁹Sensesidingil, Gesese, Zesilasie

CHAPTER TWO

MEQELE TOWN: FOUNDATION AND GROWTH 1872-1935

2.1. THE SELECTION OF MEQELE AS A POLITICAL CENTER OF EMPEROR YOHANIS

Meqele as a town is the creation of Emperor Yohanis. We know nothing as to when Yohanis started to think of establishing a new political center. But like most of his predecessors, first as a powerful local ruler and later as emperor, Yohanis must have entertained the idea partly for reasons of prestige and partly for politico-administrative purposes. Indeed, oral sources state that after his coronation as king of kings in 1872, Yohanis was busy asking elders in order to choose a site for his palace. And there is a widely accepted tradition in Tigray as to how Yohanis chose Meqele to become his political center.

Initially the emperor had planned to build the palace in Dog'a Tembien (the plain between Melfa Mariam church and Mai Merabi), in a place called Chinni. But the balabats and priests of the area opposed the idea on the ground that they did not want their land to be taken and turned in to a settlement of soldiers and prostitutes. In particular, the priests of Melfa Mariam strongly opposed the idea and are reported to have said to Yohanis: "Are you planning to have our holy places plundered by your soldiers?" As a result he abandoned the area and approached the balabats of Inderta who gave him a positive response. It was also agreed that the palace would be built in the locality of Meqele.

But when exactly the above developments took place is not still clear. Despite the vast literature emphasizing the establishment of Meqele as a political center and the building of the palace there by Emperor Yohannis, there is no mention of even probable or approximate dates as to when Meqele was selected to become the center of the empire. Even the highly informative document in regard to the early activities of Yohannis, the memoirs of Naretti, fails to give us any indication. Oral sources also simply say that the Emperor built his palace and made Meqele his political center immediately after his coronation as king of kings in 1872.² Nevertheless, the indications are that nothing was done until the second half of 1870's.

What some informants tell us is that Yohannis asked both the balabats of Tembien and Inderta and chose Meqele "when he returned from Gondar".³ But it is difficult to establish the authenticity of this claim. Because it is not manifestly clear when the emperor returned from Gondar. The earliest written reference we have about the return of Emperor Yohannis from central and north-western Ethiopia to Tigray is 1875. This again seems purely circumstantial since we do not know whether Yohannis upon his return went directly to Adwa (his capital at the time) or whether he went to Tembien and Inderta. Other documents, however, give us some indication about the presence of Yohannis in Meqele at the end of 1875 and the beginning of 1876.⁴ Thus, Yohannis might have made the selection and decided to establish a center at Meqele probably in the first months of 1876.

Yohannis seems to have had sufficient reasons to choose the locality of Meqele. For one thing the area was covered by forest and no one was in charge of the land or would resist the construction of a palace there. Secondly, as already discussed above,

from the very beginning Yohannis had been much attracted by the natural beauty of the area and called it Debre Genet and ordered the construction of a gedam there. Many informants reveal that at the time Yohannis might have had the aim of making Meqele his future capital.⁷ It was common practice for Ethiopian kings and emperors to select a place of natural attraction for a capital. The selection of Addis Ababa by Empress Taitu is a good case in point. However, Yohannis seems to have had additional reasons in selecting Meqele.

According to the oral sources the issue of the strategic and military significance of Meqele was raised during the discussion between the emperor and the balabats of Inderta. The balabats emphasized the military importance of Meqele and its vicinity. It was agreed at the time that the imperial soldiers who came to Meqele from all directions could load fire woods and feed their animals in the environs of Meqele. Those who came from the south could load firewood at Amba Alage and feed their animals at the fertile area of Haiqi Hilat and enter Meqele when they are ordered to do so. Those who came from the east could do the same in Aragure/Desa and Semba; those from the west in the places called Gereb Giba and Inda Mariam Dihan, and those from the north in Mesebo and Ilala.⁸

The above discussion does not have written confirmation. However, it appears evident that the location had some advantages which warranted attention. Meqele is located below the hill of Chomia, which as commanding position over the surrounding areas Akalou Wolde Mikael argued that Ethiopian rulers usually preferred to establish their political centers on the Shummit of hills, mountains or on a plateau.⁹ Although this did not apply in all cases, Yohannis must have been attracted by the chain of

mountains of Inda Yesus, Chom'a and Mesebo which overlooked the vast plains of Gembela, Qata and up to the areas of Tembien to the east and the areas of Gabar Milash to the south.

Besides, historical documents suggest that in order to look after the situation in the southern and central Ethiopian provinces, Yohannis was forced to establish centers and campsites at Dabra Tabor, Ashange and Ambachara. Informants also reveal that Yohannis was tired of changing his centers and was in search of a capital not far from his power base but which at the same time could serve to closely watch the southern and central provinces.¹⁰ Certainly Meqele is more favourable than Adwa in this respect. Meqele was also close to the problem areas of Raya and Azebo. It had also economic importance since it is near the salt mines of the Afar lowlands and the agriculturally rich areas of Raya and Azebo.

Furthermore oral sources state that Meqele and its environs had cultural and historical significance for Yohannis. The emperor is reported to have had close contacts with his relatives (on his mother's side) who lived in Dog'a Meqele. Besides, he spent most of his rebel days in the area and this seems to have enabled him to build confidence in the people and to consider the area as his power base.¹¹ Furthermore, there is a popular tradition which associates the selection of the particular site where the palace was built with the wedding ceremony of W/o Sillas, the mother of Emperor Yohannis. Oral sources as well as some documents (based on tradition) state that Sillas on her way to Tembien has spent a night there after her wedding.¹² Others further mention that it was foretold by Raj Woldesillasie that his descendants would establish a palace to the area.¹³ In any case, either because of the credence Yohannis may have

given to the alleged prophecy, or motivated by the above military and economic considerations, or by strange coincidence, later developments will show that Yohannis built his palace in the particular site called *Mr Ambessa* (in Tigrigna, "the resting place of lions") to the east of Medhani Alem church and made Meqele his political center.

After the selection of the site, Yohannis delimited the town area by going round the edges of the town accompanied by priests beating the drum and singing holy songs. When he delimited the area Yohannis started from behind the site of the palace and through Sawhi Nigus went successively to *Inda Aslam*, *Mai Gifaf*, *Gereb Tsedo*, *Gonai Daro*, *Inda Medhani Alem* and returned to the palace site. He is reported to have said "Meqele Dariwa Isat Mahalwa Genet Tihun" which means, "May the inside of Meqele be heaven and its outside the fires of hell". It was also declared that Meqele should be the land (or town) of everybody i.e. Tigreans, Agaws and Amharas. Thereafter he put a cornerstone on the palace site and established a Monday Market by decree. Since it was founded by Yohannis the market was also called *Idaga Yohannis* i.e. the market of Yohannis.¹⁴

Neither oral informants nor written sources enlighten us on the question of when exactly the palace was constructed and Meqele began to serve as the capital of Emperor Yohannis. Certainly in the 1870's there was no palace at Meqele. This could be seen from travellers accounts. For one thing the evidence on the life of Yohannis suggests that he was living at Adwa at least until 1877 and later spent most of the time at Dabra Tabor and Ashunge. De Cossen who visited Yohannis in 1877 clearly states that "Adwa is the capital of King John and never mentions even the presence of a village called

Meqele in the country.¹⁶ The only mention we have about the palace construction at Meqele is from the memoirs of Naretti collected by R. Hess. According to the document until late 1881 Naretti was ■ Dabra Tabor working in the building of the church of saint george and it was after finishing the church that he was ordered to build the palace at Meqele.¹⁶ Since the report of Naretti stops at this point in time it is difficult to know the exact period of the construction of the palace

Nevertheless, other documents indicate that Yohanis began to reside in his palace at Meqele beginning from the first months of 1884. When Admiral Hewett and the French mission under Lemay visited Yohannes, he was living in his palace at Meqele.¹⁷ Therefore the work of the palace must have been started in the last months of 1881 and finished around 1884, since informants said that it took three years. Thus, Pankhurst is probably correct to say that "the palace was already much advanced by September 12, 1882 and Yohanis was fully in occupation of it by 1884."¹⁸

Yohanis followed the tradition of Ethiopian rulers in utilising foreign artisans to build their palaces and ordered the Italian craftsman, Giacomo Naretti, to construct the palace at Meqele. Oral sources state that during the construction period the inhabitants of the surrounding villages helped by supplying woods, stones and water. Woods were brought from a place called Desa to the east of Meqele (near Barabile) and the women were transporting water day and night. A man called Ba'alagada Kassa was responsible for the supervision and coordination of the work of construction.¹⁹

The main building was (and still is) a two-storeyed structure and it was like a large hall, the other, relatively small, located to the right of the big building was the residence of the emperor and his wife. According to Wykle

"The palace constituted a strong fortification, surrounded by a high wall at least three quarters of a mile round, loop-holed for musketry and strongly defended in several places, and at the gate by guard houses with an inner wall about eight hundred yards round also strongly defended, while the palace itself formed the third line of defence with strong walls round the private apartments, stainless and store houses, for fire could be kept up from the castellated roof and turrets and all round."²⁰

The construction of the palace is reported to have given the settlement of Meqele additional attraction and beauty. The town now entered a new chapter of urban life.

2.2. THE PALACE, THE MARKET AND EARLY SETTLEMENT IN THE TOWN UP TO 1900

After the establishment of the palace and the market Meqele seems to have gained considerable socio-economic importance. We can say that by this time, Meqele had combined the three institutions which helped shape Ethiopian towns in the nineteenth century. These were the palace, the market and the church, which played their own respective political, economic and cultural roles.²¹ This led to the emergence of several settlement patterns in the town. The most important node of this settlement was the palace

The regular presence of the emperor at Meqele meant that his military and civil officials as well as the rest of his entourage had to be allotted permanent areas of settlement in the town. As in most of the royal capitals, high-ranking officials of the emperor and later Ras Mengesha lived around the palace and mainly to the north and east of it. To the north men like Ras Alula Abatega, King Mikael of wollo, Ras Araya Dimsu (the maternal uncle of the emperor), Wag Shum Gabru, Dejazmach Tadda

Bairu, Dejazmach Berhe, Shum Agame Tesfay ete, to the east men like Ras Bitwaded Gebremasqal, Dejazmach Tadda Aba Guben (the son of his uncle), Fitwaram Maru, Liqe makuas Bartha, Liqe Mak~~as~~ Abay, built their houses. There were also others who settled to the south of the palace. These included Mengesha Yohannis, Dejazmach Wajahu and Ilege Dinqinesh (the sister of the emperor)

The area in front of the palace was owned by Ilege Dinqinesh and the area to the north-east of the palace (around the present hospital) was the land of W/ro Tekolach, the niece of the emperor. Ras Araya Sillasia, the son of the emperor lived to the south east of the palace behind the present municipality building. The house was later turned into Teklehaimanot church while the ras was given a new house in Mai Liham.²² The area to the west of the palace was called Sewhi Nigus, literally "the grass of the king", where the packanimals of the emperor used to feed while the area to the south west of the palace later became a muslim quarter.²³

Most of the mekwaning were rim-holders and served the gedam by hiring deacons and priests. According to informants the allocation of rim to the mekwanint was intended to give prestige and honour to the church. Many of them also supported the church by giving gifts in cash and in kind (e.g. like alhasaj and kaba).²⁴ Although the mekwaning did not own much land like the relatives of the emperor, they came to constitute a significant number in the urban settlement of the town. However, unlike the kahuna of Mai Liham yefel, the mekwaning were semi-permanent residents of the town. Yohannis was pre-occupied with consolidating his military and political power and thus constantly moved throughout his kingdom. Besides, he used to make extended stays in other centers such as Debre Tabor, Ambachata and Ashange. As a result

effective politico-administrative settlement was not laid in Meqele and the mekkwanini were not able to lead a settled life

Indeed, there is no mention of a settlement in Meqele town in relation to the army of Yohannis. According to Zawde GebreSillastie, when Yohannis entered his town, he usually disbanded his troops to return to their fields and sent his military commanders back to their provinces.²¹ Partly for this reason, and partly owing to the fact that his guards were living in the space between the three round walls of the palace, there was no military camp (wetader sefer) in the town. Again the above reasons could explain the absence of quarters of royal servants such as zebegna sefer, feres beg etc. in Meqele town.²²

Perhaps no other factor contributed more to the survival and growth of Meqele town than the establishment of a market by the emperor. Markets, particularly those backed by political power have made significant contributions for the birth and development of towns in Ethiopia. Most of the large towns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Gondar, Adwa and Sogoria, were all market towns. It is also equally true that many towns which evolved around the imperial court had market places.²³ By establishing a market in Meqele, Yohannis was able to attract the northern trade route as well as the salt caravan route to the town. The role of the market and local as well as long-distance trade in activating the commercial life of the town and in shaping its urban fabric belongs to another chapter. What we would like to emphasize here is the role of the market in the emergence of settlements

Markets of political centers greatly help to direct the attention of people of the country side to the towns. According to oral sources, after the establishment of the palace at Meqele town, many people from the surrounding villages as well as itinerary merchants began to frequent the monday market and gradually many people formed a ring around it.²⁸ Besides, having laid the foundation, Yohanis began to play an important role in the commercial life of the town by encouraging and sometimes forcing women and muslim communities of the surrounding areas to settle around the market as traders. In this regard there is a popular tradition which attributes to the period of Emperor Yohanis the establishment of women tej sellers and the muslim quarter in Meqele town.

It relates that the emperor once dreamt of cows sleeping in the palace area and this was turned in to a belief that Meqele would be an important center for women. The same tradition also stated that the emperor had a firm conviction that towns could not grow without the presence of women traders. As a result he is said to have invited prominent women from the surrounding villages, as far as Tembien, to come to the town and open tej and tella houses; many of them did that. Among those who came to the town at the time were women like Tickle Cheleqot, Amete Tirso, Aberash Araya, Senbetu, Tiringo, Tokolach and Milash Bahta. They settled in the area to the south of the market, up to the place now called Inda Aboy Fiqadu.²⁹

They opened mesbetas houses where tella and tej were on sale for the mekwaining and for local as well as long distance traders. It is also reported that they provided injera or bread for merchants who spent the night in exchange for amole (calt bark), honey, butter etc. Gradually many women settled in the area and played a pivotal role

in the activities of the town in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Although men traders were able to build houses around the market, women traders remained dominant in the town until very recently. Indeed there are many small quarters in the town which continued to be named after prominent women owners of mesheta houses, which led many people to give credence to the alleged prophecy of the emperor³⁰

This period also ushered in the emergence and growth of a muslim quarter called Inda Aslam to the south-west of the palace. Again here oral sources show that Yohanis devoted much of his time to attracting muslim traders to the town. Observing the slow growth of the town (inspite of the presence of many women traders) the emperor discussed the matter with his officials. It was agreed that muslims must be encouraged to come to the town and form their own settlement as traders. Accordingly many muslims were invited to come to the town from the villages as well as towns of Inderta. This was made through a man called Haji Abubaker (a close friend of the emperor).

Many muslims from places to the south of Megele, namely, Hintalo, Harego and Aqeb Teli, were brought to the town.³¹ The first muslim settlers were about fifteen and were told by the emperor to chose their own quarter. They inhabited the stony and elevated area to the south-west (but many considered it to much infront) of the palace, east of the market as well as the area called Inda Abba Anenya.³² And it was only the market and Inda Abba Anenya sefer that separated the women locality from the muslim community.

The muslims settled according to their place of origin. Those who came from Aqeb Teli settled in the present day qebete (12 around the old mosque) and their quarter

was called Adi Aqeb Teli. The muslims of Huitalo occupied the present day yebele O4 (behind the mosque) and those from Hareqo inhabited the area to the south-west of the muslims of Huitalo. The place is exactly below Inda Maran church but within the area of gebele O4 and is called Adi Hareqo. An insignificant number of muslims from a place called Adi Nifas (near Hareqo) also settled with the muslims of Hareqo.³¹

Tradition tells us that most of the muslims did not wish to leave their original places. Many of them were forced to come to Meqele town and some of them soon returned to their original places. It is also reported that Yohanis needed them badly and declared that "let the muslims live like their fathers."³² The fact that most of the muslims opposed their transfer to Meqele and tried to return to their original places seems to have made Yohanis tolerant to Islam. Although most of my informants simply said nigd without identifying the muslims by profession, the muslims of Meqele were active in the local as well as long-distance trade of the town.³³

Likewise though the type and extent of relationship between the christian community and the muslims is not clear, oral sources show that they were living under the protection or trusteeship of the emperor. It is also interesting to learn from tradition that the muslims had a chiga shum of their own. Until the first decade of the twentieth century, however, they did not have a mosque. Nevertheless they had a cemetery of their own, the ruins of which are still visible immediately to the east of Mariam church.³⁴ In any case the muslim quarter was the largest quarter in terms of settlement and the area it occupied

Thus, it is possible ■ sum up that during emperor Yohannis Meqele was characterized by the emergence of several settlement patterns. And each settlement was distinguished by the social position or occupation of its members. Of these the communities of the kahna, mekwanint, women and muslims are worthy of note.

In the meantime, however, new developments were taking place in northern Ethiopia which were to have some negative repercussions on the town. The death of the emperor left Tigray in a state of turbulence and without effective political administration. The successor to the throne, Ras mengesha Yohannis, had his own political problems and the attention he could give to Meqele was slight. Tradition tells us that up to 1895/96 Mengesha was moving in the western part of the province and used to make extended stays at Adwa. In some respects the written sources confirm this tradition that Mengesha was busy in the border districts adjacent to Eritrea to check the infiltration of the Italians.³⁷

Indeed, the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1895-96 was to have some negative repercussions on the town. On October 9, 1895 the Italians occupied Meqele by crossing the Mereb and proceeded to Amba Alage. They were defeated at Amba Alage by the Ethiopian force and retreated to Meqele where they built a fort. On December 8, 1995 an engagement took place between Menalik's army and the Italians at Meqele. Worse was the siege of the town which lasted for about two weeks.³⁸


We have many written (Mainly Italian) sources about this period of Meqele's history. But most of them concentrate on the war and to give only a cursory account of the palace. Although Raunonda and Manegazza are able to give us some

information about the presence of a sizable settlement in Meqele, they do not mention any thing about the effect of the war on the town.⁴⁰ Oral sources state that except for some houses which were hit by mortars the damage inflicted upon the town was slight. Nevertheless, Wyld indicates that the majority of the trees in the gardens had been cut down for defensive purposes and for firewood, and part of the town had been looted by the armies of Menelik and by the Italians.⁴¹

On the other hand, Wyld states that the palace, the church and the property of the priests had not suffered so much.⁴² This seems to agree with the oral sources. It is of course difficult to say that the war went on without affecting the settlement of the town, although the fact that the reports are exaggerated can not be doubted. Whatever the intensity of the damage might have been, the Italians added one architectural establishment to the town. They erected stone houses on the nearest hill above the town which still bears the name of the fort of *Inda Yesus*.⁴³

In Ethiopia this period is characterized by expansion and consolidation of the Ethiopian state in the south accompanied by the foundation of garrison towns that eventually developed into urban centers.⁴⁴ The southward orientation of the Ethiopian state seems to have resulted in the marginalization of the north. Nevertheless Meqele continued to benefit from the measures taken by Emperor Yohannis at its foundation. It became the chief market in eastern Tigray in general and in the region of Inderta in particular. Besides, Meqele, remained the seat of the descendants of Yohannis. The fact that pre-twentieth (and sometimes early 20th) century Ethiopian towns were greatly influenced by the politico-military and administrative functions of the state could ~~some how~~ explain the subsequent evolution and development of ~~sefels~~ in Meqele town

Although Mengesha was too weak to establish a strong politico-military administration, it is reported that he was able to distribute land to some of his followers in the town. And beginning from 1896 he was living in the palace of Emperor Yohanis at Meqele. Some of his followers built houses in the quarters of Inda Aba Anenya, and in the area between Mai Degene and Gira Godobo. This area is located to the south of Kidane Mihret church.⁴⁴ However, informants fail to give us the names and number of people who settled in the town at this time. Nevertheless it is reported that their number was very small.

The only written mention we have about the presence of prominent followers of the ras at Meqele is by Wylde. Wylde observed that in 1897 Ras Alula, Ras Hagos of Tembien, Shum Agame, a man called Hagos Teferi, Nubreid Woldegiorgis and a priest called Wolde Mariam were with Ras Mengesha at Meqele.⁴⁵ However, the fact that the above-mentioned officials had their own strongholds in the other provinces meant that their stay at Meqele was temporary and occasional. Thus their importance as foci of localized concentrations (sefer) was very limited. This seems circumstantial, but this is what the oral sources tend to show. Most of my informants state that "Ras Mengesha only managed to preserve the settlement created by  father."⁴⁶ And the size as well as the settlement pattern which had emerged during the reign of Emperor Yohanis was to remain almost unchanged till the end of the nineteenth century. At the time the town area extended from Mai Libem (Kahinat sefer) and the gollam of Medham Alam in the north-east to the muslim quarter in the west and the marker areas as well as the tella and tej houses in the south.⁴⁷

We have some written accounts which could give us some information about the town in the 1880's and 1890's. Of these Gabriel Simon, Harrison Smith, Gerald Portal and Wylde are worth noting. The first written mention we have about the early 1880's is by Gabriel Simon, who visited Meqele in 1880.81 He called Meqele a village, although an important one. He also observed that there was a royal house where the emperor and his son used to reside.⁴³ Since effective politico-administrative functions were not in evidence until the completion of the palace in 1884, Gabriel Simon might have observed the predominantly religious character of the settlement and hence, called it a village.

Harrison Smith, who visited the area in 1886, gives us a general picture of the settlement of Meqele just after the construction of the palace. He says, "... we came suddenly in view of the lowlying plain on which Meqele and other numerous villages are situated". Here Harrison seem to have considered Meqele as only the palace area and the houses in the locality as separate villages. Further on the palace Harrison, based on personal observation, said "the new palace caught my eye at once, as it stands conspicuously out among the rude Abyssinian huts of the village".⁴⁴ But the author does not tell us how far the settlement of the village extended.

The British envoy Gerald Portal also provides us with a good description of what he saw during his visit to Meqele in 1887. Unlike Gabriel Simon and Harrison Smith, Portal gives us a better description of not only the palace but also the settlement in Meqele. He admired the architecture of the palace thus "... we surmounted a ridge of hills form which we looked northward over a wide, partially-cultivated plain, dotted here and there with villages, in the center of which by far, the most conspicuous object

was the new palace.¹⁰ His reference to villages is no doubt to the different settlements which had emerged in the second half of the 1880's.

Raimondo and Mantegazza have also left us some descriptions of the settlement in the early 1890's. Both of them agree that Meqele was a large settlement with a sizable population. Indeed Raimondo tells us the existence of a fairly large muslim quarter to the south-west of the palace.¹¹

Wylde gives us perhaps the most detailed information about the town. He mentions that "Meqele is a most charmingly situated town and it occupied before the war [of 1895/96] a good large area". Wylde also tried to identify the geographical location of the different settlements and said "the houses with their enclosures are built on several minor hills, with a semi-circular background of high mountains protecting the town from the north, east and south east and the town faces and looks over the plateau we came across, which is backed by Ger'alta range."¹² The above description tends to agree with the actual settlement pattern of the town described by oral sources, according to which most of the houses were built to the east and north-east of the palace, on the hilly places of Mai Liñem and Gonai Daro near Medhani Alem church.

Again Wylde, unlike his predecessors, tries to give us an estimate of the number of inhabitants of the town, stating that the town comprised about 500 enclosures with four to six houses in each, and, on the basis of six inhabitants per house, he gives as a total permanent population of about 15,000. Although this seems a rather high figure, the report leads us to assume that Meqele had a fairly large population of not less than 10,000. Describing the houses he says that the wall enclosures were built of rough

stone and the roofs and terraces were flat which is very common in northern Ethiopia.⁵³ This is confirmed by oral sources. The houses in Meqele, like those of Adwa, Aksum, Abi Adi and Soqota, were flatroofed, and of either one or two storeys. Most of them had a large wall built round a rectangular space of ground.

Both written and oral sources ascertain that Meqele from the very beginning was fertile and full of trees, bushes, flowers and streams. Most of the inhabitants had large gardens through irrigation.⁵⁴ The only Ethiopian written account we have about Meqele in the nineteenth century is by Netsanet Asfaw. Based on oral sources, Netsanet's account is important not only because it gives us the pattern and estimate of inhabitants of the town but also the type of residents. She states that there were separate areas for the muslims, the aristocrat and the common people. She further states that at the end of the century the center of the town extended from the palace to the muslim area in the south and the Medihani Alem church in the north. Her population estimate also brings us closer to the estimate of Wylde, in which she said the population at the time was over 10,000.⁵⁵

Thus we can say that despite all the political problems Meqele as the head quarters first of Emperor Yohannis and then of his son Ras Mengesha grew substantially compared to the other towns of Tigray. And Pankhurst is probably correct in saying that, towards the end of the century, the settlement was the largest in northern Ethiopia. However the growth of the town was soon to be affected and take a different direction in the first decade of the twentieth century.

2.3. THE EMERGENCE OF A RIVAL TOWN: INDA DEJ ABRAHA VS. MEQELE PROPER

As is widely known, after 1889, the political situation in Tigray was to continue unsettled for a long period of time. In November 1889 Ras Mengesha was arrested and exiled to Ankober while Ras Mekonen was made governor of both Harrar and Tigray. Mekonnen remained until 1899 in Tigray but the province was divided into several units. Adwa and Shire were given to Dejazmach Gebresilasie Bariya Gabir, Agame to Desta Sibhat, and the districts of Tembien, Inderta and adjacent areas to Dejazmach Abraha Araya.³⁶ The appointment of Dejazmach Abraha to the governorship of eastern Tigray with its center at Meqele was, however, to have its own impact on the evolution of Meqele town and its surroundings.

Dejazmach Abraha was to build a new palace to the south of Meqele town which eventually led to the emergence of a new and separate town within walking distance of the town established by Emperor Yohannis. This new development seems to have had its own political factors behind it. Both oral and written sources indicate that the presence of Abraha in Meqele had offended the descendants of Emperor Yohannis (Mainly Dej Seyoum Mengesha and Ras Gugsa Araya). They considered Abraha as an intruder and a usurper.³⁷ Abraha on his part did not look favourably at the house of Ras Mengesha, nor did he consider them as the only legitimate heirs to the throne. Abraha was the son of Be'algaula, later Ras Araya Dimisu (the maternal uncle of Emperor Yohannis) who ruled Inderta for many years. Ras Araya had been a strong

contender for pre-dominance in Tigray in the last years of the Zemena Mesafini and the first years of the reign of Tewodros.⁵⁸ As a result Abraha had a ground for claiming political control of atleast eastern Tigray (mainly Inderta)

As governor of eastern Tigray, Abraha started to live in the palace of Emperor Yohannis. This, as mentioned above, offended the descendants of the emperor as well as their followers. Indeed, they used to provoke Abraha by saying "how could an outsider reside in the palace of the great emperor?" Hearing this Abraha is reported to have said "I had considered the palace as my father's home; if you take offence, I can build another equally magnificent palace." Thus, partly for this reason and partly to build a palace he could call his own and which would be named after him, Abraha decided to build a castle. First he built his residence in a place called Feleg Da'ro. This was to serve as a transitional court until the building of a castle, which was shortly started in the area to the south of the town, along the road to a village called Deбри.⁵⁹

To what extent careful considerations were taken in selecting the new site is difficult to prove. Informants, however, state that it was chosen because it was exactly opposite the old palace. In order to bring the castle on an equal level with the old palace, the ground was filled with stones. Like the old palace the new one was also constructed by foreigners, the collective labour of the surrounding villages; wood was brought from a place called Desa.⁶⁰ By building a castle on the other side of the streams called Mai Degene and Mai Gifaf, Abraha worked hard to establish a geographically separate town. The stream of Mai Degene which flows from east to west up to Mai Gifaf was to remain the boundary line between the two towns.⁶¹

In order to establish a flourishing town called after him (and of course the area is still called Inda Dej Abraha) Abraha took the same measures which were taken by Emperor Yohannis when he founded Meqele town like emperor Yohannis, Abraha established a new palace, a gedam, a new Saturday Market, and brought muslims and women traders which led to the emergence of several new settlements. Although the vast area around the new site does not seem to have been settled prior to Abraha's arrival, oral traditions hint that there were about five huts to the west of it in the present day Adi Haqi.²

However a sizable settlement only began to grow in the area after the building of the castle and when Abraha distributed land to his followers. Thus were born quarters like Qegnai Kembilhatu sefer. Kembilhatu was the army commander of Abraha and the one who took the large area between the castle and the present Mikael church. Dejazmach Teferi, the brother of Abraha, also built a house there. The settlement of the palace servants, located to the north and east of the castle (towards the old town), gave rise to such occupational areas as sira bet and feres bet. Other followers of Abraha, including his other brother, Dejazmach Redda, settled behind the castle, in the quarter nowadays called Inda Tirota (the place of pensioned people). And people like Be'alгада Hailu, the chief of the salt trade, settled with their relatives to the north-east of the castle along the road to Quitha.³

Moreover, Abraha was doing his best to attract all the elements that had given the old town the character of an urban settlement to the new town. Oral sources state that Abraha tried to attract the former followers of Emperor Yohannis and later Ras Mengestha from around the old palace to the new town. It is reported that even he used

bribery and other incentives to achieve this. The women of the sira beg of the old palace were also told to transfer their houses and settle around the castle. The same measures were taken with regard to women mesheta business owners. But the plan did not fully succeed since most of the people (mainly the members of the sira bet) opposed the idea.⁶⁴

In order to attract the people, particularly traders, Abraha established a new weekly Saturday Market. Except for an insignificant number of people, the new market was not able to attract the residents of Meqele town proper. Many new comers were, however, able to build houses around the market to the east of the castle.⁶⁵

The other most important measure taken by Abraha was the establishment of Sillasia church which eventually turned into a gedam. The gedam was constructed to the east of the castle. It was named Debre Tsehay Sillasia, and its aleqa-melake tsehay was at parallel with the melake genet of Debre Genet Medhani Alem. The gedam was endowed with six gult lands and revenue from the customs post of Desa (in womberta) called geila lugdo. The hierarchy of administration of the gedam was similar to that of Medhani Alem in which the malake tsehay was the head of the gedam and below him were the merikata and eight lige diaqonai who supervised eighty four rim-holders under them. Each lige diaqonai was responsible for the coordination of ten rim-holders and the remaining four were called may biida.⁶⁶

The gedam established its own administration in the areas to the east, west, and south west of Meqele proper. The areas to the south of Mai Degene, the present ushake 17, 18 and 19, were under the jurisdiction of the gedam. The separate

existence of the new town's administration continued until the late 1950's. The rim-holders of the gedam built houses around the church which led to the emergence of an ecclesiastical quarter called Inda Sillasié.²⁷

Abraha also encouraged Muslims from a village called Genha, a place to the south of Meqele town, to come and settle around the new settlement. Incidentally, he took advantage of the conflict over land between the Muslim and Christian communities of Genhe. Tradition tells us that a man called Goiatana Giday, the head of the Muslim community in Genhe, used to frequent the court of Abraha ■ litigation. Gradually a close relationship developed between the two. One day Goiatana Giday presented a petition to Abraha which ran as follows: "My house is very far and I am unable to go back and forth for court cases; so give me a house where I could live as your servant." The same tradition also tells us that Abraha was badly in need of Muslims and in reported to have answered, "If you promise to develop my town it is me that have to beg you to come and settle around me." Thereafter Abraha gave the Muslims a large tract of land near the Sillasié church in a place now called gebele 17.²⁸

The first settlers were about fifteen Muslims, most of them relatives of Goiatana Giday. Shortly their number reached forty. Goiatana Giday was the sole coordinator of the Muslim trek and even those who went as far as Sogota during the conflict with the Christians in Genha were able to come to the new settlement. Although they had their town separate administration under a Muslim etaga Shum, they were living under the jurisdiction of the gedam and paid the residence fee called inteshji to the reside mezelede of Sillasié church. The Muslim quarter of the new Meqele town was called Adi Aslam Genha and constituted a sizable proportion of the new settlement.²⁹

Thus, Abraha was able to establish another Meqele town which combined the three institutions which shaped Ethiopian towns at the time - the palace, the gedam and the market. But the urban activities in the new town was short lived. Towards the end of 1909 Wag Shum Abate was appointed with jurisdiction over Tigray. Abraha opposed the measure and rebelled against the central government and went to Korem to stop the advance of Abate further into Tigray. Following a bloody battle on October 9, 1909, Abraha was defeated by the forces of the central government which led to his imprisonment and subsequent death.⁷⁰

Besides, Abraha was not successful in his efforts to overshadow the old Meqele town as a result of the opposition he faced from its residents. Many people were offended by what they called "the efforts made by Abraha to turn the palace of Emperor Yohannis into Kitchen."⁷¹ Indeed, after the departure of Abraha the new settlement was marginalised and waned in importance. As a result many people, Mainly the muslims, were to shift their houses to the old town. Since the successors to the governorship of eastern Tigray were living in the old palace, they gave full attention to Meqele town proper. The threat of brigands was one of the reasons which made many Muslims leave the new settlement in search of protection in Meqele town proper,⁷² which was the old urban center and at the same time the seat of the new governors.

However, the rise of another town within walking distance of its predecessor had some effects on the development and growth of Meqele town in general. Obviously its growth must have been affected by the attention that had been given to the new settlement. Besides all the elements that had given Meqele proper the character of an urban center faced a challenge. Yet, probably due to the indifference shown by the

residents of the old town to the measures of Abraha as well as because of the short duration of his governorship and again probably due to the already established commercial importance of the town. Meqele proper continued to be a center of a growing urban settlement. On the other hand, the establishment of another Meqele town was in the long run to benefit the physical growth of the town in general. Due to the southward orientation of Meqele town in the coming years, the settlement that emerged during Abraha's governorship was to become the southern most settlement of Meqele town. Thus, we can safely argue that by establishing a new town, Abraha contributed much to the growth of urban quarters as well as to the increase in population.

After the defeat of Abraha Wag Shum Abate became the ruler of Tigray. He remained in Meqele for a few months and was replaced by Ras Wole.⁷³ The only mention we have about the activities of Abate in Meqele town is from the worqi wonjel (riste mezzgab) of Sillasié church. Here it is mentioned that Abate renovated the church of Sillasié.⁷⁴ We do not have any indication as to other steps taken by Abate in Meqele. The same is also true with Ras Wole who was the overlord of Tigray after Abate. What we certainly know is that all the appointees were living in the old palace and their soldiers used to sleep within the walls of the palace.⁷⁵ This could be the reason for the absence of settlements testifying to the historical presence of Ras

Makonnen, Wag Shum Abate and Ras Wole in Meqele

2.4. THE EXPANSION AND GROWTH OF THE TOWN IN THE 1920'S AND 1930'S

Dejazmach Seyoum Mengesha was given the area governed by Abraha, Inderta, besides his former areas of Tembien and Abergele. The division of Tigray into different governorships each directly responsible to the central government seems to have only exacerbated the struggle for supremacy at the local level. Thus, at the time there was scarcely any strong politico-military administration which was conducive for trade and urban growth. Tradition also tells us that Seyoum directed his efforts to the renewal of the old palace. His efforts were limited to the palace area. He also built a house at a place called Analem, to the south east of Meqele, and renewed the church of Gabir near the town. The town returned to its normal activity and some people were able to build houses in the quarter called Inda Aba Anenya. Like his father and grand father, Seyoum distributed land to his followers in the area to the north and east of the palace. Men like Dejazmach Maru and Dejazmach Berhe built houses near the present hospital. The last years of Seyoum was characterized by instability in the area; things began to change only during the period of Ras Gugsa Araya after 1921.⁷⁶

The last two decades of our period were significant for the development of trade and the further urbanization of Meqele town. Ras Gugsa is praised as a man of justice and administration. He is also remembered in the town as a good entrepreneur and the man who encouraged people to build houses. At this time Meqele showed both qualitative and quantitative growth. Gugsa constructed Mariam church to the west of the

palace and distributed land to his followers to the south of it. The areas to the south of Inda Aba Anenya and the muslim quarter were settled by his followers as well as many people from the surrounding area.

People like Dejazmach Maru Wodajo, Fitawrari Tadia Niguse, Fitawrari Gezahegn, Fitawrari Hallu Gezahegn, Dejazmach Abraha Woldesariel, Dejazmach Asbaha, Balamharas Hailemariam Marid, Nuhreid Tesfay, Dejazmach Bazabih and Fitawrari Wereide Hagos settled near Mai Gifaf, in the present day gebele's 11 and 12. Other influential officials like Rajirond Zagaye, Fitawrari Imam, Fitawrari Abebe Hagos and Dejazmach Radda Aiba also built houses near the present day Inkode (cattle slaughter house). It was also at this time that the town hosted a large number of people who came from Wollo as followers of the ras. Of these Fitawrari Gesese Belete, Fitawrari Gebresillasie Belete, Fitawrari Abebe and Dejazmach Mengesha of Wag settled in the present day gebele 20, to the south of Mariam church.⁷⁸

Mariam church also became the node of a new settlement of a predominantly ecclesiastical community. Most of the clergy who were assigned to serve in the church were granted land to the south and west of the church. Of these Qese Gebez Gebremedhin, Qese Gebez Abraha, Merigata Kassa, Merigata Birhane, Mihray Hadgu are not worthy. At this time the settlement to the south west of Meqele reached the village called Adi Shum Dihun. Rise Debri Gebrezgi, Liqe Mezemiran Kahsay were among those who built houses near the village. Gradually the village was incorporated into gebele's 11, 12 and a good part of gebele 20.⁷⁹

The period also witnessed the emergence of new rules and regulations relating to land distribution and the construction of houses. It was declared that any one who received land would have to construct a house over it within six months.⁴⁰ This shows the large number of people who entered the town at the time which forced the chiefs of the area to enact laws and regulations. The development of trade and the prosperity of the town in the last years of our period, no doubt, must have paved the way for the construction of many houses. The area located between the Muslim quarter and the settlement that had emerged during the Abraha period, which was covered by trees called ingule, was densely inhabited at the time. The houses built during the 1920's and 1930's reached the areas under the jurisdiction of Sillasié church in the south west. Some houses were also built in the north-east of the town as well as in the center, in between the tella and tej houses of Meqelee proper and the present stadium.⁴¹

Before the coming of the Itelians we can say that there were about five cores of settlement in Meqelee town. The first core was located to the north-east of the town, between the palace and the old churches of Medhani Alem and Kidāne Mihret. This area was predominantly occupied by the officials of the gedam as well as the descendants of Yohannis. The second core of settlement was to the south of the palace and the old market area. This area was predominantly inhabited by traders and mainly female mesheeta business owners. The third core of settlement was to the south-west of the palace as far as Mariam church. This area was by and large settled by Muslims. The fourth core of settlement was to the south and west of Inda Aba Anenya as far as the villages of Adi Shum Dibun in the west and Mai Gifaf in the south. This area was occupied by the clergy of Mariam church and followers of Gurgsa. The fifth core of settlement which was increasingly threatened by the expansion of Meqelee town proper

was the settlement that had emerged during Abraha's rule. Although weakened after Abraha, the settlement continued to benefit from the socio-economic activities of Meqele town proper and constituted a sizable agglomeration of houses with its own gedam.

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The physical feature of Meqele town remained largely unchanged for some time after the death of Emperor Yohannis. Later, however, it began to show changes and finally expanded in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Thus, when we analyze the foundation and physical growth of Meqele town, the political factor is significant. Although greatly helped by trade both the court and the church played a pivotal role in the evolution of many sefers. There were five churches in the town and of the settlements mentioned above three of them had their churches as their cores. We can say that from the very beginning Meqele had combined the three institutions i.e. the palace, the market and the church, which all played their own political, economic and social roles. All of them were also crucial to the emergence and growth of settlements. The physical growth of the town from its foundation up to the 1930's shows that Yohannis, by establishing a political center in Meqele, seems to have determined the future political fortune of the town.

But as in the case of most twentieth century Ethiopian towns, trade and economic activity was to play the most important role in the urbanization of Meqele town. In particular, the salt trade had greatly contributed to the survival and growth of the town as an urban center. To this can be added the intermediary role Meqele played in the trade between the Italian colony of Eritrea and other parts of Ethiopia in

the first three decades of the twentieth century. The surplus accumulated by both the people of the area and the local elite from the rich local as well as long-distance trade seems to have also played its own role in the urban growth of the town. This will lead us to describe the socio-economic dynamics of Inderta Awraja in general and reveal the extent to which the salt trade as well as the trade with Italian Eritrea and other parts of Ethiopia promoted the urban growth of Megele town in particular.

CHAPTER TWO

FOOT NOTES

¹Informants: Gesese, Bayru Gebre yohanis, Gebremedhin. Yohanis himself was born in a place called May Biha near Chinni.

²Ibid: Informants further stated that most of the relatives of Yohanis were living within the monastic community of Melfa Mariam which might have been one reason for the opposition made by the priests

³Ibid. Informants: Gebrekidan Desta. sertsedingil revealed that when Yohanis abandoned the area for Inderta he said to the balabats of Tembien "you will later rush, carrying your provisions, to wherever I built a town to beg for land". Many readers could be surprised by the discussion and ask themselves how an autocratic ruler could entertain such things. But almost all informants firmly stated that Yohanis was a kind of honest and religious man and used to fear the excommunication of religious leaders and had a great respect for elders.

⁴Informants: Toklu, Zesilasie, Gebremedhin. The oral sources simply say Yohanis as king of kings established a town, a market and a palace and all the written accounts limit their report to the following words: "Yohanis had a palace at Meqele."

⁵Informants: Sertsedingil, Gesese, Bayru, Gebremedhin.

⁶Zawde Gebresallasie, Yohanis IV, p. 67 & 82; Pankhurst, Ethiopian towns from mid 19thc to 1935, pp. 120-121.

⁷Informants: Sertsedingil, Gesese, Toklu, Gebremedhin.

⁸The explanation about the military importance of Meqele was presented by a man called Gabru Diban from a village called Gembella (to the west of Meqele area).

⁹Akalu Wildamikaël, "Some Thoughts of the Process of Urbanization in Pre-twentieth century Ethiopia" in Ethiopia Geographic Journal, V.S., N. 2 (1967), pp. 36-38.

¹⁰Informants: Gesese, Gebremedhin, Bayru. Almost all informants indicated that the issue of the rebellious districts of Raya and Azebo was very crucial for Yohanis.

¹¹Selene "Seyoum, Yohanis IV"; Informants: Gesese, Bayru, Zeray etc. Both Selene and the oral sources mentioned that after the death of their father, Kassa and his brothers moved from Tembien to Inderta adjacent to the Taltai plains where he married the daughter of the chief of the taltals. At the time Yohanis must have learned the economic importance of the salt flats

¹²Bayru Tafia The Chronicle of Emperor Yohanis, p. 76, Pankhurst, p. 120 all informants also share the report

¹³Informants: Sertsedingil, Zesilasie

¹⁴Oral sources further revealed that the settlement around Mai Lihem, the present Meqele hospital, Sew'm Nigus, the palace area, Musim Quarter, Mai Gifaf, the present Mahahariya and Gonai Daro were included in the town area

¹⁵De cossen, The Cradle of the Blue Nile: A visit to the court of King John of Ethiopia vo. 1 (London: John Murray, 1877), p. 54

¹⁶Stacchi, "The Memoirs of Giacomo Naretti", p. 916

¹⁷Zawde, p. 136 and 138.

¹⁸Pankhurst, p. 121

¹⁹Informants: Bayru, sentsedingil, Gesese, Toklu. Since the women of the area were busy transporting water many of them were reported to have created conflicts with their husbands.

²⁰A. B. Wylde, Modern Abyssinia (London: Mathew and Co., 1901), p. 121. My own observation could also be taken as an additional confirmation to the report made by Wylde.

²¹Akalu Woldemikael, "Urban Development in Ethiopia 1889-1925" in Journal of Ethiopian Studies v. 11 n.9 (Addis Ababa, 1973), p. 1; Crummeys, p. 23.

²²Informants: Gesese, Zeray, Miraf Abay, Gebreziabihar.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.* The mekwanint used to hire deacons from 4 to 5.00 birr per month.

²⁵Zawde, p. 80.

²⁶Mahari Gebresallasie, Heilu Yigabawal, Gebremikael Tella. The case of Addis Ababa is totally different. Mainly after the battle of Adwa the Shewan nobility were able to lead settled life and built permanent residences. Thus, round the gebbi of Menelik many followers built houses which led to the rise of sefers. According to Bahru Zawde, A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1974 (London: James currey, 1991), p. 69 different quarters of the nobility and settlements of the palace servants gave rise to service establishments such as zebegna sefer, seralegna sefer, weha singu sefer etc.

²⁷Abdussamad H Ahmad, "Baso: A Commercial Enclipt of Gojjam 1841-1889" B. A. thesis in History (Addis Ababa University, 19), p.s., Crummeys, pp. 5-7.

²⁸Informants: Kasa Berhe, Ibrahim Hagos, Kindeya Alamu

²⁹*Ibid.* Bayru, Gesese, Birchiqo Hagos, Amlasu Wandim, Miraf Abay

³⁰*Ibid.* Still many quarters in the town are named after the prominent Meskela house owner. For instance Inda Indebetey Tokolach, Inda Indebetey Tunjo

¹¹Informants Ibrahim Hagos, Abdulqadir Mohammed, Berhe Kat. say, Abdulrahman Giday

¹²Ibid., The emperor was reported to have said 'muslims must settle informt of me

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.: According to the above mentioned informants most of the muslims opposed the measure and used to say "Meqele Yemibal Berha Heden Animotim".

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Wylde, Modern Abyssinia, pp 51-52 and 179: Based on this informants had the impression that the attention of Mengesha was for Adwa and not for Meqele town.

¹⁸Raimondo G.B., L'assedio di Macalle (Finalborgo Tipografia, 1901) pp. 59-65; Bahru, pp. 76-77; Vico Mantegazza, Gli italiani in Africa: L'assedio di Macalle (Firenze: Successori Lemonnier, 1896), pp. 305-321; Harold G. Marcus, The Life and Times of Menelik II Ethiopia 1844-1915 (Oxford: clarendon press, 1975), p. 166.

¹⁹Raimondo, p. 308; Mantegazza, p. 302.

²⁰Wylde, p. 299; Pankhurst, p. 123

²¹Wylde, p. 299; Marcus, p. 166; Informants: Gesese, Astesehegn.

²²Ibid., Prouty, p. 145.

²³Akalu, "Urban Development in Ethiopia, p. 1.

²⁴Informants: Astesehegn, Adhana, Hadis Dababay, Gebregziabihar. Gesese.

²⁵Wylde, p. 312.

²⁶The most surprising point here is that when I asked informants about the developments that occurred in regard to the growth of the town under Ras Mengesha, all of them said "nothing".

²⁷Informants Gesese, Bayru, Toklu and others

²⁸Gabriel Simon, Voyage en Abyssinie chez les Gassas Rajas. L'Ethiopie, Ses Moeurs, Ses Traditions et Negress Yohanness, Les Engliesses Monothie - Delalibela (Paris: Challeumel Aine, Editeur, 1885), pp 183-187 and p 347

²⁹Harrison Smith Through Abyssinia: An Envoy's Ride to the King of Zulu (New York: A C Armstrong and son 1890), pp 229-232

⁵⁸Gerald Portal, *An Account of the English Mission to King John of Abyssinia in 1877* (Winchester: Warren & Son, 1877) p. 186

⁵⁹Raimondo, p. 61; Mantegazza, pp. 302

⁶⁰Wyle, p. 237 and 307

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.: Informants: Toklu, Gebregaziabihar, Kassa, Hailamariam Kahsay.

⁶³Nalsanat Asfaw, "Makalle: An urban study" B.A. thesis in Geography (Addis Ababa University, May 1966), pp. 12-13.

⁶⁴Hadara Tesfay, "Ras Seyoum Mengesha 1877-1960" B.A. thesis in History (A.A.U., 1976), pp. 2-3; Tsehaye Haile, "A short Biography of Dej Gebresallasse Bariya Gabir 1873-1930" (A.A.U., 1972), p.9.

⁶⁵Ibid.: Informants: Adhana, Gebregziabihar, Gesese.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Informants: sensedingil, Asreschegn, Gesese. It is also reported that Abraha once upon a time said "a person only remembered by what he accomplished" which could lead us to believe that he build his own palace partly for reasons of fame.

⁶⁸Informant Heilu Yigabawal revealed that the work of the palace was discontinued three times on the ground that its style become different from that of the old palace.

⁶⁹The palace around the stream where the present Meqele health center and manahariya is located was considered as the border areas between the two settlements until Mengesha Seyoum merged the two towns in the 1960's.

⁷⁰Informants: sensedingil, Heilu, Gesese, Zeray

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²According to Gebremedhin and Gesese a woman called W/ro Yeshe Weqit, a famous lej maker of Yohanis and his heir Mengesha was forcefully brought to the new castle and she used to create problems and show her opposition in different forms. As a result Abraha ordered her to bring water from the surrounding areas. Then she is reported to have said "how on earth my back, the back of the lej of Emperor Yohanis could be turned to serve water "and cried" "the people of Metema, where are you?" Hearing this Abraha answered "even if the people of Metema came they are my relatives and not yours"

⁷³Ibid

¹⁰⁰The church was turned into a gedam by the blessing of the patriarch (Petros) and king Menelik in 1899. The Worqu wenjel of Sillasié church, Ellero, p. 61 and informants also mentioned that the six gult lands were found in Dog'a Meqeie (Ainalam), Munguda in Hintalo, Baikolo in Inda Mekoni, Qerano in Ger'alta, Quantafa ■ sira and Adi Walal was exchanged to Medhani Alem church for the land in Mai Gifaf near the castle.

¹⁰¹The full construction of the gedam was completed after the arrest of Abraha and his daughter Shewainash was in charge of all the areas administered by the gedam. There is a song in Inderta which shows the completion of the gedam by Shewainash as follows: አዋይኽ እብርሃኑ ሸሮሃኽ Shewainash Abraha built a gedam and until the 1960's the separate existence of the area continued and the inhabitants were paying the matasa (residence fee) to Shewainash through the riste mezzgab of Sillasié church.

¹⁰²Informants: Abdulqadir, Ibrahim, Barha.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Hadera, pp. 657; Tsahaye, p. 37

¹⁰⁵Although its authenticity is questionable both Gesese and Mi'raf stated that part of the palace used to serve as a kitchen and the other part as a camp for the soldiers of Abraha.

¹⁰⁶Informants: Ahamad, Abdalqadir, Berhe.

¹⁰⁷Hadera, p. 9; Tsahaye, p. 18.

¹⁰⁸The riste mezzgab of Sillasié church, p. 16.

¹⁰⁹Informants did not recall anything about Abute and wole in relation to Meqeie town

¹¹⁰Informants: Bayru, Gesese, Nega Gebrehiwot. According to Hadara and Tsahaye the first years of Dej Seyoum's governorship were unstable. The rivalry between Seyoum and Gugsä was to remain for a long time. Although the years after 1914 were considered as relatively peaceful, disturbances were created by the son of Seyoum, Kassa in 1918 which continued until 1919.

¹¹¹The period of Ras Gugsä is also remembered for its peace and stability in the area and at this time the division of Tigray was narrowed into two rivals (houses) i.e. Dej Gehresallastie of Adwa and Ras Gugsä of eastern Tigray.

¹¹²Informants: Gebreyohannis, Bogale Gezahegn, Hagos Desta Gebremikael, Takele Desta, Kasa Tegegn

¹¹³Ibid.

⁶Ibid. . This will be more clarified in the fourth chapter in relation to the urbanisation of Meqele in the 1920's and 1930's.

⁷ Ibid. Informants: Kindeya, Kahsay Gebremedhin.

CHAPTER THREE

SALT MINING AND TRANSPORTING AS HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTION IN INDERTA

An Introductory Note on the Salt Economy of Inderta

Inderta Awraja is situated in Tigray province. It borders by Kille Awlailo and Agame in the north, the Afar lowlands in the east, Tembien in the west and the districts of Raya and Azebo in the south. Like most other parts of Tigray the people of Inderta are sedentary agriculturalists. But, many households supplement their income by mining and transporting salt from the Danakil lowlands to the northern highlands. Indeed what has distinguished the Inder tans through history was their central position in transporting the principal article of exchange, salt, which has been used in trade for many hundred years¹

The historical evidence on Inderta suggests that household production was supplemented by salt-mining in the adjacent lowlands as well as on interregional exchange with other areas of the central highlands. The salt trade greatly helped Indertan households to broaden their income-generating activities. Unlike what prevailed in the world of "peasants", Inder tans did not sell their small stock in times of distress but quickly rushed into salt mining. They considered the salt mine as a capital at hand or a reserve which is available at any time. This became evident when we look at the popular saying that "while the salt is still in Arho (salt flats) and the goat

is in Soqola, husband and wife create conflict in Indertana which means while the Indertans are in their village they think that they have a goat brought from Soqola for exchange

Salt provided an important source of household income that compensated for decreasing agricultural productivity. And on many occasions, far from being self-sufficient, the Indertan farming household relied on the mining and transporting of salt. Moreover, the presence of a universal need for the salt currency together with the growing need of the Indertans to have a fair income for subsistence were strong factors for their involvement in the enterprise. Oral sources further state that the love of Indertans for salt is equal to the love others have for gold. Hailamikael Misgina is probably correct in saying that 'to the Indertan miners salt is what Eldorado was to the European seeking gold.'⁹

A study made in the 1950's and 1960's shows that in the village of Hareyna, near Meqele, fifty-four households were engaged, one way or another, in salt transporting. Again tradition tells us that out of the twenty households in a village called Adi Welel (very close to Meqele) more than twenty-five men were salt miners.¹ The household as a basic economic unit provided the organisational framework for the different activities made by its members. It was the stronger members of the family who went to the salt plains since the journey was hazardous. The other members of the household were involved in the selling of salt bars in the different markets. And these are the means by which Indertan peasant household managed its resources and met the family's basic needs.²

Although the toil of extracting and transporting salt was out of proportion to its meagre return, Indertians continued to be involved in it for many hundred years. The process was excessively hazardous to the extent that not even people of the neighbouring districts, let alone people from far places, thought it worthwhile ■ be fully engage in the occupation.⁶ This will become clearer when we look at the manner of salt mining and transporting. Furthermore, an examination of this process in relation to the salt trade could be another way of looking in ■ the socio-economic base of both the local elite and Meqele town.

The Geographical Location of The Salt Deposits (Arho)

The source of all the salt bar (*geila* in Tigrigna and *amole* in Amharic) in circulation in Ethiopia was the salt plains in the Afar lowlands to the north east of Inderta and east of the province of Agame nearly a hundred miles south of Massawa, a plain stretching north and west of lake Assal (Karum), across the Gallab Saba stream. It is located in southern Afar in the area generally called Dallol. Dallol is 120 meters below sea level and the highest place in the area is 56 meters below sea level.⁷ The Danakil depression is divided into two sections. Both sections are sharply delimited on their western part by the Ethiopian plateau. The northern section is between the river Endali and Mt. Dallol and is named as Chebro. The second section goes from Dallol to Ertaie and its name is Asal or Arho.⁸

The name Arho is mostly used by Indertians to refer to the salt plains while the Afar call it Reged. The salt area is like a vast white plain, so vast that the salt miners had difficulty telling the directions N E S W. During the dry season the salt ground

is like a plowed land but when periodical rains drain from the surrounding hills of Agame through a place called Ragayle to the area, the water becomes very much concentrated and rapid evaporation leaves a fresh white deposit of salt which can simply be cut.⁹

3.1. THE ORIGIN AND DYNAMICS OF SALT MINING AND TRANSPORTING

The salt deposit was according to tradition first discovered by an Indertian. The man had a camel which used to disappear from him and after many days of searching he found it in the salt flats licking the salt. Having tasted the salt the man was attracted by the mineral and brought a piece of salt, tying it on the neck of the camel, to his village. The man told his countrymen about the salt and they went in large numbers to see the area; they were amazed and all of them brought small amounts of salt to their homes. Since then salt was mined by the Indertians who transported it to the highlands by camels, mules and donkeys¹⁰. Camels were to become the major means of salt transport. Since the salt was discovered by a camel, Indertians came to say "ገጠጡ ለገነዝቡ ለገነዝቡ" camel you discovered salt and you are paying for it¹¹. We do not know exactly when the above developments took place. Some informants place them during the Gonderine period¹². Written sources, however, show that the salt bar as a currency and as a major trade item existed in Ethiopia long before the Gonderine period.

Before the miners start on a mining journey they have to make intensive preparations. Honey, wheat or barley flour were essential food provisions. They must

transporting. The be'alгада was appointed by princes and kings, and ruled the areas from the place of origin of the salt all the way to Indera. Most of my informants did not know the origin and exact meaning of the name be'alгада. Some informants, however, offer some clues about the source of the name, attributing it to the first man who discovered the salt.

It relates that the man who first found the salt deposit took the piece of the salt which he brought from Arho to the king (we do not know the name of the king). The king was happy and told his ashker "take the man to the guada (kitchen) and give him some awards", hence, the name bale-guada (the man of the guada) gradually took the sound of be'alгада. Others narrate an almost similar story. The king, having told the man to sit on a bed, tested the piece of salt and was amazed and said "ba'algaye Ida Ametahu". Thus, the word is a corrupted form of either the phrase baleguada or the sentence ba'algaye ida which is attributed ■ the exclamation uttered by the king when he saw the man and tasted the salt. Tradition further tells us that the king in question appointed the man as the governor of Indera and the adjacent lowlands. Since then the title be'alгада has been conferred solely upon a native of Indera and has been hereditary.¹⁷

The be'alгада was a person whose influence over the socio-economic and political life of Indera was considerable. Oral sources state that he was considered above ijawari and equivalent to dejazmach. He was the person responsible for and concerned with the administration and protection of the salt miners, and the collection of salt customs dues.¹⁸ This seems to have been the reason why the be'algadas emerged as a powerful figure not only in Indera but also in the whole of Tigray. They were

able to emerge from their base at Hantalo as powerful contenders in the politics of northern Ethiopia. Rulers of Tigray in the nineteenth century like Ras Weldesillasie and Ras Araya Dimtsu were initially be'algadas who ruled the salt mines and Indera.¹⁹ However, the power and influence of the be'algada's began to decline in the second half of the nineteenth century. They started to restrict themselves to the administration of the salt miners and the customs post of Berahle which was by its nature seasonal. Any dejazmach who ruled Indera began to appoint and send any one he liked to Arho giving him the title of be'algada.²⁰

We do not know the reasons why the influence of the be'algada began to diminish in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But some hypotheses could be put forward from the general political conditions of that period. For one thing the rise of Emperor Yohanis in the area seems to have minimized the political role of the be'algada. And after Emperor Yohanis, the district began to be ruled by his descendants. Besides, Tigray was divided in to districts ruled by chiefs directly responsible to the central government. Moreover, the subsequent centralisation process seems to have made the be'algada's loose their political and economic power.

For a good part of our period, the be'algada used to coordinate the shumbahri's and was the one who first went to Arho to make sure the safety of the route. After spending a night in Arho he returned to the customs post of first Meglala and later Berahle to supervise the collection of taxes. He was also responsible for the safe arrival of the money collected to Meqele. Above all he was most concerned with the safety of the caravanners. While the status of the be'algada was above filawran the shumbahri was like a chikra shull (some of them also saw wasitda guz).

The shumbahri, which literally means "coastal chief" was elected by the people of a village or various villages subject to confirmation by the be'alгада. There were many shumbahri's in Inderta with the same status. The villages of Didiba, Dergajen, Gabai Milash, Tsira, Gembella, Qata, Serawat had their own shumbahri's. And the salt caravan was organised by the shumbahri and more than twenty shumbahri could start the journey at one time but would arrange their own program and rest in different places "

The duties of the Shumbahri were multifarious. He would announce the date of the departure to Arho. He was charged with leading his group (mostly people from one village or up to three villages) to the mines and was responsible for low and order in his group. He was paid for his services by the government or the local rulers and was instrumental in transporting the revenues collected at Berhale to Meqele.²³ Further examination of the way the revenues were transported ■ Meqele could be helpful to know the organisation of the salt miners at the grassroots level

Since the Maria Theresa thalers were heavy, the money collected at one time was divided among the different shumbahri's. Each Shumbahri in turn gave it to the people organised under him and known as mekeba. The term mekeba derived from the word kibj or circle attributed ■ those who formed a circle and ate together. Their number ranged from seven to ten. They were often called mequarist (those who ate or cut ambasha, bread or injera together). There were about five or six mekeba's under one shumbahri. The different mekeba's of a village would transport the money allocated to the shumbahri to Meqele through a relay system

Members of one mekeba who carried the money for a whole day would then transfer it to the other mekeba in the evening. The same pattern would continue until they reached near the town. Finally the last group would give the money to one man from among the mekeba, who with the help of the shumbahri would submit the money to the chiefs of the palace treasury. The members of the mekeba, from which the last man was assigned to go to Meqele, used to divide the salt bars among themselves and give to his family.²⁴ Thus, every movement of the miners was well-organised.

With the foundation of Meqele ■ the capital of Emperor Yohannis, the route to Arho was by and large diverted to the town. Most of the traders chose the outskirts of the town as the area from where to start their journey together. Indeed the caravaneers from the villages to the west of Meqele also started ■ pass through the town. Then they went north-eastwards to Feleg Daro-Dirba-Shiguala - Gondele - Wessema Aini Ala - Desa - Dargulli - Adi Kuairit - Berable - Maikel Kilemay - Saba - Gara and finally Arho. (see fig. n.2) They left the old market centers of Agulai and Asbi to the left and went directly through a place called Haiqi Mes'hal, the shortest route to Berable.²⁵

There were three halting places for the night, namely, Desa, Berable and Saba or Gara. The entire journey took from seven to nine days. The homeward journey usually took from four to five days because the loaded animals travelled slowly. Thus the caravaneers made a total of 300 miles in eight or nine days. When they started the journey from around Meqele in the early morning they would reach Desa ■ the evening and spend the night there. It was in Desa that the miners prepared the wooden instruments. After packing their pack animals at night they would proceed to Darguli and spend the whole day travelling through Adi Kuairit and enter Berable in the

evening. However, some of them used to spend the night at Adi Kuairit and reach Berahle after mid night.²⁶ Berahle was the border town between the Indian highlanders and Afar lowlanders. And beginning from the 1890's it became a major customs post where the miners made an extended stay.

It was also from Berahle that the miners took instruments such as the goat skin water container and a rope called shimel. Then they would leave Berahle and proceed to the open desert through which they could cross Maikel Killemay and reach Saba in the evening. In Saba they would spend a good part of the day washing their bodies and feeding their animals. Since it was the last watering station before reaching Arho it was a conducive resting place for the exhausted miners. Then they left in the morning and proceeded to Gara and entered Reged in the evening. Sometimes they reached Gara in the evening and stayed there until mid night so as to enter Arho/Reged in the early morning and start mining before the sun grew too hot.²⁷

Since, in the early years, relation with the Afar was not good, the Indians used to mine and prepare the salt bars themselves. They worked together and divided themselves into different work groups. Some of them with a pole in each hand (Shikal), pried loose slabs of solid salt from the dried bed of lake Assal. Another group, armed with long sticks, would separate and lift the large slabs of salt from the ground. The work is called fiṅa and the workers ṣenawo (who lift and supply). The next group cuts the slabs roughly in to manageable bricks and the third group smoothed the bricks into their final shape and sometimes packed them on the back of the pack animals.²⁸

Nevertheless if the miners reached Arho in the early morning and felt they had enough time to finish the mining before four o'clock, each miner would cut the slabs and smooth them himself according to his needs. The salt was shaped and prepared in different forms since each salt block had its own special requirements which determined its value. However, the most widely used salt bar which was transported to the highlands was the salt block called ganfur. The ganfur was divided into four parts called geila or amole in Amharic. But there were other forms, namely gel'o, gerewagna, 'ankerabo, limesdaw and asale.³⁰

The geila was the principal salt bar needed all over the country for exchange and as a trade item. Many sources give different estimations about its size and weight. For instance Abir states that it was 22cm long and 2 1/2 cm thick and weighed one kilo while Pankhurst says it was "over eight inches long, an inch and a quarter by a little more than two inches wide in the center, tapering to about an inch at the extremities". It is however generally agreed that the weight of the geila (amole) was not more than one kilo and not less than 750 grammes.³⁰ The gel'o was a bit larger than the geila and was mostly mined by people from Wejerat as well as Raya and Azebo since their camels were huge and stronger than those in Inderta. The 'ankerabo was very small in size and like the gerewagna it was carried by hand and mostly served for household consumption. The limesdaw was the largest type: it had a length of about 30 cm and a thickness of six to seven cm and weighed two kilo's. As is understandable from its name, it was used more recently, and some informants said after the coming of the Italians.³¹

After finishing mining the miners would start packing. Two ganfur's were tied by one shimel and put on the wooden material called ko'o. The ko'o was like a stick put horizontally on the back of the animal. It would keep the salt hanging without touching the mule back. Two salt blocks (ganfur's) were tied side by side with the shimel fibers. The two pieces were put together on the one side and the other two on the other side of the mule or camel back until the necessary number of salt bars were loaded. Then it was covered by the tolish often called tankobol.³²

The pack animals carried different numbers of salt blocks according to their strength. Again ~~here~~ different sources give us different estimates of the number of salt blocks each animal carried. On the average, however, a camel used to carry from 25 to 33 pieces of ganfur or between 225 and 295 geila's, a mule between 18 and 25 pieces or from 150 to 200 geilas and a donkey from 14 to 20 pieces or between 100 and 120 geila's.³³ The mining and packing process was made quickly in order to escape the hot sun. Besides, mules could not stay long without drinking. The miners also needed water, as a result of which they had to leave the area as soon as possible and reach Gereb Saba before mid day.³⁴

On the homeward journey the miners followed the same route. Since the animals were loaded the homeward journey was slower and the miners usually spend four night at Gara, Saba, Berahle and Desa. Thereafter they used different directions to reach their respective villages. The people of Derg'ajen split at Wesema. But most of them followed the route Desa, Dibiba, Harayna, sheket, Feling Daro and Meqele. This is mainly true of the villages to the south west and north-west of Meqele town. Adi Shum Dibun, Gemibella, Jada, Mar Ambessa, Ichro, Kokolo, Mochun, Adi Yikuro

etc. Those to the far south passed through Qutha before reaching Meqele which was true of the places called Seharu and Gabar Milash."

Up to the end of the nineteenth century the miners first went to their villages and prepared the salt bars there. They left the crushed salt called Dikum Chew in their houses and brought the salt bars to the different markets of highland Ethiopia. Gradually, however, most of them started to sell their salt at the market of Meqele. Indeed, in the last two decades of our period, they started to come directly to Meqele town and exchange their products at the market.¹⁶ In this way Meqele town began to host a large number of salt traders.

Although it is difficult to know the exact number of salt traders who came to the town, oral sources stated that about 2500 salt miners used to enter or pass through the town every fortnight during the mining season.¹⁷ Again it is difficult to give the amount of salt brought to Meqele market. However, it is believed that at least 75% of the salt in circulation in the country in one way or another must have passed through the town and its surroundings. Annaratone estimates that the annual amount of salt production was about 11,500,000 geilas. Calculated on the basis of the average price at Meqele for a good part of our period, which was 13 geila's per thaler, this came to a total amount of 880,000 thaler.¹⁸ On the other hand, Franchetti indicates that about one million thalers were circulated annually in the salt trade. This excludes the money paid in taxes and for other costs.¹⁹

From the above discussion we can safely argue that Meqele was at the center of a large commercial activities as a result of the salt trade. It also shows that Indertans

were closely attached to salt mining and transporting. Being the principal salt hewers and having been connected with the money economy, they were to play a pretrial role in the development of a market at Meqele town. There is a connection between surplus accumulation and the growth of towns.⁴⁰ This is also true of the local elite which had a sizable income from taxation. The place which most symbolized tax revenue for the rulers of the area in general and Meqele town in particular was the salt customs post of Berahle. Located at the junction of Indertan highlanders and Afar lowlanders, Berahle also served as a meeting point of conflict and integration between the two peoples.

3.2. BERAHLE: TAXATION, CONFLICT AND INTEGRATION

Taxation was the main means of extracting surplus from peasants and traders and therefore the basic means of support for the ruling elite in Ethiopia. Taxes were imposed on traders at customs posts or kella's and at key points along the major trade routes and at market places. As is to be expected in a non-monetized society, most payments were made in kind. The types of such payment, however, seem to have varied with time and place. But in general it is agreed that they included such sundry items as cows, oxen, sheep, goats, horses, mules, salt, silk and even slaves. The taxes were paid at customs gates established by the central government or by different local chiefs. This was also true of the salt trade.

Oral sources state that in the early times the salt miners of Indertan used to pay taxes in the form of mules. The inhabitants of each village were forced to pay a mule tax. A kind of extortionate lottery was drawn among the villagers and the victim.

winner was liable to hand over his mule as a payment representing his village. As a result fierce quarrels sometimes even lasting for several days, were common at customs posts.⁴¹ And it is true that in traditional Ethiopia taxation was arbitrary and excessively burdensome and a source of constant clashes between traders and tax collectors.

The same tradition attributes to one of such clashes the change of the type and amount of taxes paid by the Indertan salt traders. It relates that a man from a village called Gondete became an unlucky lottery winner among the salt traders of his village. He was ordered to surrender his mule by the tax collectors. He had only one mule which he had obtained ■ dowry from his bride. Refusing to hand over his mule, a large-scale clash emerged between him and some of his relatives on the one hand and the tax collectors on the other. Then he was reported to have dragged the chief of the customs post into the nearby hill where both of them died.

While dragging the official into the hill, the man is said to have said the following:

በትሊ በትሊ መርዓት
the mule of the bride

ስንቂ ስንቂ ሐማት
those provisions of mother-in-law

እንደርታላ ከንሐድጉሉ ስርዓት
lets leave law and justice for Indertans

እኔ እኔ እኔ ይውረደኛ መዓት
and let tragedy befall the two of us

After the above incident the caravanners crossed the customs post without paying the tax. After that the type and amount of taxes paid along the salt route were improved. In fact it was changed in to salt, one load of a camel paid three geilas, a mule two geila and a donkey one geila.⁴² We do not know when the above developments took place since informants simply say it happened in the ancient times. Others, however, hint that it was during the Gonderine period.

The only reference we have to the reform made on taxes along the route during the Gonderine period is the one made by Emperor Iyasu I (Adiam Seged r.1682-1706). Both oral and written sources mention that during his reign, there was widespread discontent among the salt traders ■ the number of kellas and the amount of taxation. Hearing this, the emperor was reported to have summoned all the customs officials along the salt route from Inderta all the way to Gondar. It was decided to minimize the number of kellas to lower the amount of taxes paid.⁴³ Whether this attempt at tax reform was the one triggered by the Indertian salt trader is difficult to ascertain. But the conditions which led to tax reform and the amount of taxes now fixed seem to hint that there must have been some sort of connection between the two.

The chronicle of Iyasu I relates that the emperor gave orders for the elimination of many customs posts and issued a decree that binds only one customs post to be set up in one ager (such as Ger'alta, Tembien, Abergele, Sehart, Tsira). It was also decided that the tax should be one angle for five mules and eight donkeys.⁴⁴ Although the chiefs of Inderta were among the principal officials present in the decision-making, there is no mention of Inderta in the areas referred to as ager. Undoubtedly as a major salt transit area and similar, "if not more, to the areas mentioned above in terms of size

and importance, it is believed that at least one customs post must have been set up on Inderta. Be that as it may, some sort of relationship appears to have existed between the reform made nationally and the change in the type of taxes paid in Inderta. All informants confirm that after the incident the burden of taxation was greatly reduced.⁴²

Although it is assumed that the tax reform resulted in the establishment of one customs post in Inder ta, the presence of more than four kellas is ascertained. And mainly in the nineteenth century the rulers of Inderta (who used to reside at Hintalo) levied taxes in the two major customs posts i.e Meglala and Maikel kiltemay. But there were other smaller posts at Desa, Agoro and Liguda.⁴³ During the reign of Emperor Yohanis IV taxes were paid at Meglala. Even in his rebel days, Yohanis had benefited much by taxes collected from the salt trade. At Meglala the taxes paid were tow thalers per camel load or from four to five geilas. Some informants, however, said that three, two and one geila was paid for a camel, mule and donkey loads respectively.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, written sources show that four bars of salt were levied from each camel, two from a mule and from every two donkey load. And both oral and written sources further state that the tax during Emperor Yohanis was at a modest level.⁴⁸

The head of the customs post of Meglala was a man called Blana Gebregzi Gombal. After the death of Emperor Yohanis the customs post of Meglala was transferred to Berahle. Taking advantage of the chaotic conditions in Tigray following Merema, the Afar, led by a man called Mujahid, attacked the customs post of Meglala and Maikel kiltemay. As a result, Ras Mengesha, the successor to the throne, ordered the evacuation of the customs post of Meglala and established another at Berahle, a place near the highlands. The origin of the name Berahle itself indicates the conflict

then between the Afar and the Indertians. Ber means kella or door in Tigrigna and hile means keep it or guard it. Thus, the sentence Berika-hile took the corrupt form of the word Berahle.⁴⁰ Since then Berahle became the main salt customs post in the area. Any mention of the name Berahle was and is associated with taxation and tribute-extraction of the local elite in Tigray in general and Inderta Meqele in particular.

Although informants failed to give us the amount of taxes paid at Berahle after Emperor Yohannis, it is believed that their rates were rising. This seems to have been due to the political instability which reigned in the area which must have made the rulers of the area desperate for higher income to defray part of the cost of keeping a large army. To this can be added the eventual need of the powerful central government to have a sizable share from the salt revenues. This must have made the provincial officials increase the rates of taxation at the local level. And written sources show that at one time during Ras Mengesha Yohannis, 15 bars of salt were paid per camel or mule load and seven per donkey load. On the other hand, oral sources hint that from eight to ten, four to six, and two to three bars of salt were paid for each camel, mule and donkey load respectively.⁴¹

In the early years of the twentieth century, the taxes paid for each load was three thalers for a camel, two for a mule and one for two donkeys but sometimes four, two and one thalers were paid respectively.⁴² Similar payments continued to be paid up to the end of our period. And according to O'Mahoney, the taxes in 1935 were 3.00 for a camel, 1.50 for a mule and 0.50 for a donkey load.⁴³ Nonetheless, apart from Berahle there were other small posts such as Desa and Lugda, where from one up to two geilas were paid which was mainly collected by churches and convents found in

Inderta and Tembien " Thus, the local elite as well as the central government derived a large income in the form of taxes collected from Indertian salt-hewers This will become clearer if we look at the tribute extraction and its effects on the political and socio-economic life of northern Ethiopia in general and Inderta in particular.

It is true that the Ethiopian state (as an imperial court) used to appoint local agents for the collection of customs dues and implementation of its taxation policies. Before 1900, however, the relatively weak imperial court could do little more than appoint a sympathetic governor at the regional level. Governors and local leaders in turn gave their own men military titles and issued judiciary and fiscal policies. In the case of Inderta the be'alгада was the one (who was) responsible for the collection of taxes on the salt trade as an agent of the regional or local elite. He was baleqamis (appointee) and played an intermediary role between the mass of traders and the rulers. Practically, he had overall control over the major economic life of the area. As a result the office of the be'alгада remained to be the main means of rising to economic and political dominance over Inderta at least up to the second half of the nineteenth century.

The history of Indertian rulers shows that they used to exercise local economic and political power more or less independent of the Gonderine kings. Although this was the rule of the day, the rulers of Inderta had a great deal of revenue which made them strong enough to command a sizable army and exercise independent power. We have written sources which confirm this assertion. Henry Salt, citing the example of one of the powerful regional rulers in northern Ethiopia in the early nineteenth century, states:

Ras Welde-sellase the first situation he held of any importance, which undoubtedly led to his greatness, was that of Balgudda or protector of the salt caravans in an office always conferring considerable consequence on its possessor, owing to his being entitled to a duty on every load of salt imported into the country, and from the power which it gives him of withholding this very necessary article of consumption ■ well as barrier, from the interior provinces."⁵⁴

The above description is also shared by the oral sources. Both sources indicate that income from the salt trade enabled the rulers of Inderta to keep a sizable army and to buy firearms.⁵⁵ We do not have any estimate of the amount collected by the chiefs of Inderta in the first half of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, it is assumed that they were wealthier than at least the other chiefs of northern Ethiopia. According to Abir, the bitter and continuous struggle for power in Tigray (mainly among the chiefs of Agame and Inderta) in the nineteenth century could also be explained, to a certain extent, by this economic background.⁵⁶

Again the above reason explains the emergence of be'alгада (later ras) Araya Dimtsu of Inderta to political prominence over a large part of Tigray. He was the main obstacle to the predominance of Dejazmach Wube over Tigray in the 1830's and 1840's. It is interesting to note that Parkyns described be'alгада Araya as the chief of Inderta and Arho. Equally significant is Parkyns's description of the influence of be'alгада Araya "Like Robin Hood, or any other such hero of story, the be'alгада's life and actions form the subject of numerous legends and tales."⁵⁷ Thus, control over the salt trade was the key to wielding of power at the local and regional levels. Still this could partly explain why Tigrean rulers involved themselves to a much higher degree than their Shewan counterparts in the political intrigues and civil wars that took

place during the Gondarine period as well as during the Zemene Mesafint. Indeed, confident of their base, many of them used to exercise power equivalent to the position of ras and sought only confirmation of their offices from Gondar.

This trend seems to have continued until the end of the nineteenth century. The economic importance of the salt trade in helping the Tigrean chiefs to raise a sizable army is again revealed in the second half of the nineteenth century. Written sources hint that Yohannis, while still only a ruler of Tigray, raised 20,000 dollars in 1868. Yohannis as a shifita must have been aware of the economic importance of Indera and the adjacent lowlands. This could explain the reason for the concentration of his activities in the area in his early rebel days. It is stated that Emperor Yohannis was relatively lenient on taxation. But with all the leniency and the alleged modesty, he was said to have raised a net annual revenue of 40,000 thalers from the salt trade. And Pankhurst's assumption that Emperor Yohannis was richer than any of his predecessors could likely be tenable.⁵⁴

After the death of Yohannis, his descendants had to share their income with the relatively successful imperial state. By the end of the nineteenth century the imperial government was able to diminish the power of the Tigrean nobility and take over control of the salt revenues. Written sources show that in may 1899, Ras Mekonnen, then governor of Tigray received 10,000 dollars.⁵⁵ On the other hand informants state that around 10,000 bars of salt must have been collected by Mengesha and later Dejazmach Abraha. They further estimate that Dejazmach Seyoum and Ras Gugsa must have raised more than that. The reasons they gave for this was simple, the flourishing of the salt trade in the early twentieth century.⁵⁶

We have some written accounts about the money raised by the local officials of Inderta in the above-mentioned period. Both Martini and Pankhurst show that Mengesha received about 10,000 and his successor Abraha not less than 20,000. They further reckoned the annual estimate the authorities of Meqele raised at more than 100,000 dollars. This is also shared by Franchetti, who says a revenue of 100,000 thalers per year entered Meqele treasury from the salt produced at Asale.⁴¹ Annaratone, on the other hand, believed (a belief shared by Pankhurst) that some 200,000 dollars were probably collected annually from salt officials throughout the country.⁴²

The above discussion is Mainly true of the last two decades of our period when Meqele witnessed a boost in commercial activities. And it is equally true that by now the central government had taken control of the salt revenues and was more conscious of the considerable income raised from the salt trade. The fact that, as early as 1909, Wag Shum Abate was appointed over Tigray with the title of gerach⁴³ could partly explain this.

The afore-mentioned amount of income raised by the elite could have been more than that had it not been for the shares taken by the convents and churches. The politico-economic base of Indertian rulers must have been conducive to the emergence and development of towns in the area namely, Hintalo, Chelqot and Meqele. The events of the early twentieth century show that the local elite was to play an important role in the development of trade and the introduction of new urban indexes to Meqele town.

Conflict vs. Integration

The history of the relationship between highland and lowland peoples in Ethiopia was characterized partly by formal tributary relations and partly by contacts of conflict and cooperation.⁶⁴ Tradition tells us that the relationship between the Indertans and the Afar was characterized by killing, enmity and distrust of each other.⁶⁵ There were many reasons which contributed to this

Historically, the highland Indertans were launching small scale raids against the Afar. This is mainly true of the people of Didiba-Derg'ajen (contiguous to the people of Wejerat) who used to participate in the raids sponsored by the Wejerat people. Such raids were called Gaz or Megeza and usually involved livestock and camels, which were the vital means of salt transport. This in turn seems to have triggered Afar counter attacks against the Indertan salt-hewers aimed at ransacking the camels. Since the Afar considered all camels owned by the highlanders as theirs they used to concentrate their attack on the camels owned by the Indertan salt traders.⁶⁶

Besides, the very claim made by Indertia over the salt plains was one major source of disagreement between the two. And obviously the Afar felt invaded when their salt was mined by outsiders. Later in 1935, Nesbitt states that "inspite of the abundance of salt the ferocious Afars are forever fighting the Indertans".⁶⁷ In order to hamper the Indertan salt-hewers they used to open attacks en route. To this can be added the religious differences between the belligerents. Some informants also stated that the Afar used to cut genitals of their enemies for cultural and ritual reasons.⁶⁸

The scarcity of water in the Afar lowlands was also at the back of the clashes and conflicts. An Afar used to kill an Indertian only to take the water container Englebert makes this point clear as follows: "the tribesmen [Afar] who roam here are not always likely to be friendly to strangers - for one more stranger means less water for everyone, and water, in these searing wastes, is a thing to fight and kill for."⁶⁸ This idea is also shared by oral sources in that the Afars used to resist the Indertians from fetching water and washing in the Gereb Saba near Gara.⁶⁹ For reasons discussed, the two peoples were in continuous conflict. After all it was partly due to this enmity that the Indertians went to Arho in large numbers carrying all available firearms. It was also for the same reason that one of the main tasks of the be'alгада became the protection and safety of the salt caravans.

Oral sources state that "we have passed the last hundred years by killing each other." They further deny the statement made by Abir which says "an ancient agreement existed between the Tallales and the people of Tigre by which the Tigreans were allowed to descend to the Taltal plains and extract as much salt as they could against a small payment."⁷⁰ Nor does this statement find confirmation from other written sources, notably Nesbitt and Bauer. Indeed, there are two place-names along the salt trade route which symbolize the conflict between the Afar and Indertians

The first one is located near Arho and is called Mumat Aboy Iyob, i.e. the death place of father Iyob, commemorating the man by the same name who was killed by the Afar while returning from Arho. The other, located between Barahle and Desä, bears the name Mifihlay Kile Deqimo, i.e. the separation of two brothers. Here two brothers were taken by the Afar in two different directions to be subsequently killed. Thus,

most of our evidence shows that the two peoples were in constant tension which made the route risky for the Inderians until the middle of our century. It was for the above reason that upon reaching Desa (in the highlands), informants claimed, the Inderian salt miners got tired of kissing each other besides exchanging words expressing the safe arrival of their fellows.¹¹

Indeed, safe return from Arho was considered as a great moment and a sign of heroism in the Inderian households and was attended by ceremony. Henry Salt has something to say in relation to this:

... Balguda Hannes had gone down for the purpose (salt mining) with about 200 of his followers. As they descended to the valley, the inhabitants of chalicot went out to receive them, and greeted them with the same joyful acclamations with which they honour their warriors when they return from battle. The purpose of escorting these kaſilas (group of traders) may be considered as extremely hazardous; the whole neighbourhood of the plain, from which the salt is procured, being infested by a cruel race of Galla [obviously he is referring to the Afar]. Even when the Balguda and his followers are present, frequent skirmishes take place"¹²

The Afar, though better armed, did not have the organisational dynamics of the Inderian salt miners. As a result most of the time they did not confront them face to face. Instead they preferred hit and run tactics. Informants comment that when the Inderians proceeded to the salt flats in large numbers, the Afars who lived near Gara used to evacuate the area and settle in a place called Sanda further east of Arho.¹³ Many damages were, however, inflicted on the Inderians by some bands of Afar in the last hundred years. Notwithstanding this fact, the Inderians continued to mine the salt deposits and made it their tributary. During the mining season we can say that the salt route and the salt area of the Afar lowlands was under the effective control and

jurisdiction of the Indertian salt traders. And this could explain why the rulers of Inderta in general and salt miners in particular, the be'algadas, were considered as the governors of Arho.

Gradually, however, the long period of economic dependence on the Afar lowlands on the part of the Indertians brought about unofficial kind of contacts between the two. Unable to stop the Indertian miners, many Afar were eventually absorbed in to the dynamics of Indertian salt mining and transporting. Individual contacts emerged in the form of small-scale exchanges of products, sharing some instruments as well as cooperation and division of labour in the process of mining. And above all a kind of mutual understanding was reached on the extremely hazardous occupation. This was manifested more in Berahle than in other place.

In Berahle there was a permanent station for soldiers guarding the money collected from salt taxes. There were also people who were assigned to help the collection of customs dues. Both of them constituted a rudimentary form of a garrison type settlement. Although most of their work was of seasonal character, their extended stay in the area led to the creation of a node of socio-economic settlement. Eventually Berahle evolved in to an important economic and administrative post. It was from Berahle that the adjacent lowlands were monitored. Although the aim of the functionaries at Berahle was geared towards extracting tributes they were in one way or another to help the evolutionary process of integration between the Afar and Indertians.

The customs officials acted as hosts to the be'algaday and the shumbahiri's. Thousands of miners also made an extended stay at Berahle more than any other place along the route. They not only paid taxes but also made extensive preparation to pack and load their materials as well as the money collected from taxes. This seems to have led to extended face-to-face meeting and knowing each other between the Afar and the Indertans. According to O'Mahoney "Berahle was a frontier post where the christian Ethiopian culture of the highlands and the Islamic culture of the depression meet face to face: the christian Tigreans and the Muslim Danakil stare each other across a dried up river bed."¹⁴ Be this as it may, the settlements which emerged around the customs office seem to have attracted the surrounding as well as passing Afars to visit Berahle. Those who used to sell shimel, water container and tolish along the salt route gained favourable conditions to exchange their products in an area where a large number of customers were found. As a result, close relationship and contact began to emerge between two warring parties and two ecological zones. This led to socio-economic interdependence between the two peoples

Indertan miners were not only dependent on the Afar lowlands for salt but also for instruments which made the mining and transporting of salt possible. Most of the material used in the packing of salt were found in the lowlands and were supplied by the Afar. And the development of the salt trade in the first decades of the twentieth century increased the need and importance of such support services. Most of the materials were supplied to the miners at Berahle and the Afar women played a principal role in this respect. One feature of interdependence could be explained by the fact that Afar women loaned goat-skin water-containers to the Indertan miners. This water-container called sa'at and shibret was prepared from goat skin by skinning the goat

carefully and sewing the open space that emerged around the neck. A hole was prepared through the leg part of the skin.⁷⁵

The sa'ar was made without shaving the outer part and by tanning the internal part of the goat skin. The second one called shihret was produced by shaving the outer part hairs and tanning the internal part of the skin. The sa'ar was more preferable since it made the water cool and sweet. Both the sa'ar and the shihret were loaned or rented to the miners for two ganfurs of salt. The traders took them from Berahle and gave them back to the Afar women upon their return. Grain flours and bread (ambashas) were also given as additional forms of payment. The Afar women also sold the shimel which was prepared from a tree called shibgo or ija found in the Afar lowlands. The shimel was often called sedemta, since most of the time eight shimels with a total length of thirty meters bound together (in Afarigna called sedemta) were sold for one birr.⁷⁶

In the early times the Afar women used to wait for the Indertans along the route to sell the shimel. With the establishment of Berahle and the subsequent relationship that emerged, however, they used to come to Berahle and started the enterprise as full-time residents of the town. In the last years of our period, carrying the shimel many Afars began to frequent Meqele market. Then the shimel began to be sold not only for Indertans but also for other long distance traders that came from different areas. Apart from tying the salt the shimel began to serve for binding other products on the back of animals. This became more evident when Meqele started to play an important commercial role in northern Ethiopia. The Afar at Berahle also sold the material called

tolish. Informants, however, fail to give us the type of charges paid for this particular material. They simply say that salt bars as well as grain, barley and other flours were given to the Afar women as payment.⁷¹

In any case, what is clearly known ■ that a large number of Afar women started to settle at Berahle and built houses in the settlement centered around the office and houses of customs officials. The Afar women began to host the Indertian miners and most of the miners used to enter first the houses of these Afar women upon reaching Berahle. They put their provisions and took rest there. They also began to prepare bread and left the remaining provisions (Mainly flours) in the houses of the Afar women. The Afar women were mainly in need of flours and many Indertians began to rely for most of their services on them at Berahle.⁷² This gradually led to close contacts between culturally and religiously different people. The extended stay and regular contacts with the Afar women seems to have made them have intimate relationships. As a result of this, many Indertians were able to have Afar lovers called foyaqir or fiqir (i.e. lover in Afarigna). Although formal marriage was not conducted, the Indertians continued their close relationship with the Afar women. And according to informants later on some of the foyaqir were able to come to Meqele and settle there.⁷³

Another very important aspect of cooperation which sprang from the hazardous nature of the salt trade was in the field of mining. Until the end of our period the Indertians used to extract the salt from the ground themselves. And at that time the number of pack animals Indertian households owned were also very few. With the development of trade in the last two decades of our period, the number of pack animals

owned by Indertan salt hewers increased considerably. To this can be added the importance given to time and personal welfare which probably sprang out of the profitable trade. Thus, the Indertans started to rely on the Afar for mining and cutting the salt bars. At the initial period they paid the Afars in kind: grain flours, grain, ambasha etc. But later it was changed into thalers. Still there is no clear evidence about the amount of money paid for mining. Some written sources however, hint that for a day's work each miner received one thaler, one ambasha and one goat skin of water.⁸⁰

Nonetheless, there is disagreement among the oral sources as to when such division of labour and payments in thalers were began. Some of them ascribe it to before the Italian occupation while others attribute it to the Italian period.⁸¹ In any case such a relationship could not have emerged overnight. It must have resulted from the long process of contact and interaction between the two peoples. It is believed that this socio-economic interdependence continued well up to the end of our period. And influenced by the relationship as well as the growing trade, many Afars began to proceed as far as Meqelet town to exchange their products for thalers but mainly for gram and other agricultural products.

CHAPTER THREE

FOOT NOTES

¹Informants Hadish, Bayru, Gesese and others. Tradition further tells us that for Indertians salt was just like agriculture and the statement "salt and Indertians are the same" is widely said by most of Indertian elders.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.; Hailamikael Misgina, "salt mining In Inderta". in Journal of Ethiopian Studies, v. 4 n. 2 (H.S.I.V, 1966), p. 129

⁴Franz Dan Bauer, "Land, Leadership and Legitimacy Among The Inderta Tigray of Ethiopia". Ph D thesis (University of Rochester, 1973), pp 25-26; Informant: Kabsay, Binega.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Informants reveal that most of the traders from Tembien and selewa did not proceed to the lowlands and used to return from Desa or Berable and some of them used to chant Desa Darash.

⁷Victor Englebert, "The Danakil, Nomads of Ethiopia's Waste lands" in National Geographic v. 137, n. 2 Anthropological survey, N.D., pp. 186-193.

⁸Carlo Annaratone, In Abyssinia (Rome: Enrich Voghera, 1914), pp. 400-408.

⁹Englebert, p. 189; Informants: Bayru, Kabsay, Gesese.

¹⁰Informants: Bayru, Sentsedingil, Hadish, Toklu and others.

¹¹Ibid.; Hailamikael, p. 128.

¹²Informants: Bayru, Hadish.

¹³Hailamikael, p. 12; Informants Toklu, Kabsay, Bayru, Hadish and many others

¹⁴Ibid., Annaratone, pp 400-408

¹⁵Annaratone, p. 402. The poem አረሮ ስነ ስለጸገሉ ገሰ አነ which means "the one who went to Arbo in June is the one who is unable to get creditor or quarantier" clearly shows the above fact.

¹⁶Hailamikael, p. 129; Informants almost all of them start their story about the salt trade by the mentioned sentence.

¹⁷Ibid. Informants: Mahari, Gesesew, Balay, Informant Bayru however hinted that *gadu* in geez means gift or sitota, hence, *be'algadu* means *balestota* a man who received gifts. Nevertheless the remaining informants, however, failed to tell us its

origin and simply said like the Shum Tembien, Shum Aganie, Nubred of Aksum the title of be-ahada was allocated for Inderta

¹⁸Ibid

¹⁹Ibid. Mansfield Parkyns, Life In Abyssinia V II (London John Murry, 1835), pp 22-23.

²⁰Informants: Bayru, Sersesdingil

²¹Informants: Bayru, Gesese, Hadish, Toklu and others

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid. Although some of them said the shumbahri was paid forty thalers for one journey it is not a widely accepted truth.

²⁴Mainly informant kahsay revealed that the last man who was assigned to transport the money and the shumbahri would meet before reaching Megele and after they handed over the money to the chief of treasury, they usually went to the lej houses.

²⁵Informants: Bayru, Toklu, Hadish, Gesese.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid. According to informant Bayru most of the time each miner separated, lifted and cut his own salt bar.

²⁹Ibid: Annaratone, p. 405; Raimondo Franchetti Nella Danalia Ethiopia. Spedizione Italiana, 1928-29 (Milano: Mondadori, 1936) p 240; informant: Yayu Beriwa. According to informants the ashaile mineral was guarded by soldiers for special purpose.

³⁰Ibid: According to Franchetti the size of the amole was 5 + 5 + 25 cm. He also stated that 10x10x50 ganfur was equivalent to eight amole. And around 1933 I M. Nesbitt, Desert and Forest. The Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil (London: Hendersen and spadling Ltd., 1934), p 438 observed the amole as 12 inches long and 1 1/2 inches thick.

³¹Informants: Bayru, Toklu, Hadish, Yayu

³²Ibid. They further stated that the two ganfur's put together on one side were called flage wadin (one Wadin).

³³Ibid. It is by and large accepted by most of the written sources like Ferdinando Martini, I Grandi Italiani D'Africa. In Diario Equino volume quarto (Firenze: Vallecchi editore 1946) pp 163-170

³⁵Englebert, p. 191 The question of water was very crucial and many informants reveal that many miners died of thirst and there is a song which confirms this ለርሃ ልግቶ፡ ሠብረ፡ ቀረጸሉ ግፍ ግፍ ለናባ፤ literally means 'Arho was bad and your husband perished there crying water: water'. The vastness of the salt flat was also another source of death for many miners. Since the salt deposit was covered by a pure white colour shining like a mirror, most of the miners were unable to identify the N.E.W S direction. Those who spent the night there used to sleep by resing their heads towards the plateau so as to know the homeward direction when they wake up. Besides, many of them were attacked by bitter-headaches and got lost. The Indertans explained such disappearances by a belief called Halawil i.e women satanic creatures who lured people in unwanted directions singing

³⁶Informants: Bayru, Toklu, Hadish, Kahsay and others

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Innaratone, p. 404.

⁴⁰Franchetti, pp. 240-243.

⁴¹Crummey, "Towns In Ethiopia," pp. 7-8. Crumney states that the surplus accumulated by the ruling class usually turned to meet the needs of the same class, needs which arose in the process of urbanization, p. 164.

⁴²Informants: Bayru, Sersedingle, Toklu, Hagos, Hadera.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ignatius Guide, Annales Regime 'Iyasu I (Paris E. Typographeo Republica, 1910), pp 195-200.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Informants: Toklu, Hagos, Hadera, Bayru.

⁴⁷Ibid; Informants: Zeray, Binega

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid, Richard Pankhurst, Economic History of Ethiopia 1800-1935 (Addis Ababa H.S.I.V press, 1968), p. 525.

⁵⁰Informants: Bayru, Hadish, Kahsay, Toklu.

⁵¹Ibid, Pankhurst, p 525

⁵²Informants: Gesese, Hagos, Binega

⁵⁰Kevin O'Mahoney, 'The salt Trail' in Journal of Ethiopian Studies vol 8 n.2 (H.S.I V, July 1970) pp 148-152

⁵¹Informants: Sentsedingil, Zesilasie, Hagos

⁵²Salt, Voyage to Abyssinia, p. 326.

⁵³Informants: Gesese, Bayru

⁵⁴Mordechai Abir, Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes (London: Longmans Green and co. ltd., 1968), p. 48

⁵⁵Parkyns, p. 107; Tadesse Gebregziabihar, "Power Struggle In Tigray During the Zamane Masafint 1769-1855" B.A. thesis in history (A.A.U., 1871), pp. 30-34.

⁵⁶Pankhurst, p. 336. & 325; Martini, p. 168 and 549.

⁵⁷Pankhurst, pp. 520-525; Martini, p. 549. Pankhurst mentioned that only in 1902 the central government raised 854, 427 dollars salt revenues.

⁵⁸Ibid; Informants: Bayru, Binega, Toklu, Hadish.

⁵⁹Pankhurst, p. 525; Martini, p. 168; franchetti, p. 242

⁶⁰Annaratone, p. 405.

⁶¹Hadera, p.9; Sahaye, p. 37'; Informant: Gesese. According to Pankhurst, Economic History, p. 525 in 1902, 1903, 1904 the salt recieved by the imperial treasury was 23.4%, 27.4% and 21.3% of the total revenue respectively.

⁶²James McCann, From Poverty to Famure In North East Ethiopia: A Rural History 1900-1935 (Pennsy/vania University Press, 1987), pp. 70-72.

⁶³Informants: Bayru, Zeray, Hadera

⁶⁴Ibid, Informant: Hadish, Hagos, Toklu.

⁶⁵Ibid; Nesbit, p. 438.

⁶⁶Englebert, p. 186.

⁶⁷Informants: Amsalu, Bayru, Zeray and others

⁶⁸Ibid; Abir, "Salt, Trade and Politics In Ethiopia in the Zamane Masafint" in Journal of Ethiopian Studies v.4 n.2 (H.S.I U July 1966), p.2. Bauer, p. 18.

⁶⁹Informants: Zeray, Balay, Mahari Bayru. Oral sources further stated that if an Inderman killed an Afar he was referred to as Hajja (means mine or my hero) This is also shared by Bauer, p. 18

³Salt, pp 361-62

⁴Informants: Hadara, Bayru, Zeray, Gesese, Binga; Hailamikael, pp 132-133
 Inderian tradition further reveals that the Afar were not ■ such sharp shooters, as a
 result of which they used to say

ንእና ተተሰሰ ባዶ

if we [Afar] shoot, nothing happens

ከስታን ተተሰሰ እቶ

But if the christians shoot they beat the back

⁵O'Mahoney, pp 148-152.

⁶Informants: Bayru, Kahsay and others.

⁷Ibid; Abdulrahman, Ahmed.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid. Only Bayru and Kahsay said that some Inderian salt miners brought two
fogagur to Meqele.

¹¹Ibid; Englebert, p. 194, Annaratone, p. 405.

¹²While Informant Bayru supported the first version while informant Toklu
 stressed on the second one.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE AND THE

URBANIZATION OF MEQELE TOWN

4.1. MEQELE: A COMMERCIAL ENTREPOT OF NORTHERN ETHIOPIA,

1900 - 1935

Highland Ethiopia has experienced urbanization for many centuries. The ancient kingdoms of Aksum, Zagwe and Gondar, and the recent ones of Shewa, Gojjam and Wallo had their urban centers. Most Ethiopian towns emerged mainly along the caravan route, as political centers as well as around churches. This pattern continued in the nineteenth century as well, as one can see from Meqele town.

As in many other places, the settlement in Meqele first emerged around religious centers of the Ethiopian Orthodox church. This settlement got further boost from the foundation of a large church followed by the court, both established by Emperor Yohannis in the 1870's. Many scholars of urban studies agree that in the past religion has normally been a factor for the emergence of urban settlements. This, coupled with the influence of a political center led to the emergence of sizable settlements by drawing the people together in a central political and religious nucleus.¹ Furthermore, the imperial court encouraged the creation of sefers, where the government functionaries, their families and retainers resided. At an early stage, the town population was largely made up of soldiers and the entourage as well as relatives of the emperor, besides the priests. This idea is shared by scholars like Tringham

'The first cities which develop in such states tend to be garrison towns and centers of administration and court life, around which traders, religious specialists, craftsmen and retainers may congregate as appendages of royal power".

The fact that the urbanisation of pre-twentieth century Ethiopia is intimately related to the rise of political capitals could partly explain that Meqele as a rising settlement benefited much both from the church and the court. It is also true that the conditions for the sustained growth of such towns were mainly created by the activities of the government or the local elite. Here, many may think that with the disruption of effective politico-military functions the importance of such towns would diminish. Many towns were, however, able to survive and grow even after their decline in political importance. And Ethiopian history is full of such cases.¹ This is also true of Meqele town.

The historical documents on urbanisation in Ethiopia suggest that no town has ever been exclusively either a political, a military, a trading, or a religious center. If we look at the large towns of the last three hundred years like Gondar, Adwa and Hinfalo, they evolved by combining both religious, political and commercial centers. Above all, they had a court and a market which attracted local as well as long distance traders.⁴ The difference among these towns seems to have lied in the predominance not in the exclusion of one or the other of these activities. The case of Meqele town is not far from this fact. Thus, the aim of this discussion is to identify the main activity which ensured Meqele's survival and growth.

Meqele as a salt market center

When Meqele was founded and became the political center of the empire, other considerations came into play. Above all, it already had some economic importance. Many urban analysts stress that towns primarily depend upon their economic base.⁷ In the Ethiopian case the market and not the factory was the Main node of economic life for the towns. From its inception Meqele was both a political and a market center. The church and political functionaries drawn in to the town could not have done other than creating a market center for trade and other services which swelled the economy of their place of residence. To this can be added the geographical proximity of the town both to the salt mines and to the salt trade route.

Indeed the growth and development of towns in Ethiopia appears to be linked with trade and trade routes. Since early times the northern part of the country seems to have benefitted much from the trade activity that was flourishing in the region.⁸ At least from the thirteenth century, the northern route which crossed through the region east of the upper course of the river Mereb in Hamasien, eastern Tigray and the Doba country seems to have been used for long and in the Zagwe period it was already frequented by salt traders.⁹

Alvarez, who visited Ethiopia in the years between 1520-26, the seventeenth century accounts of Almeida, as well as the chronicle of Iyasu I show that the salt merchants passed through the region of Inderta to the central, southern and western parts of the country. Again many written sources confirm that the above trend continued until the nineteenth century. Places like the plain of Ciembella, Tsira and Igi

Hariba (very close to Meqele) were mentioned in the accounts as areas found along the salt trade route which goes through Hintalo to the south.⁸ Furthermore, most of the sources mention Atshi in Agame, Hintalo and Hewsaba in Inderta, Abi Adi in Tembien, Samre in Selewa and Soqota in Wag as the most important salt markets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁹

However, with the foundation of Meqele town by Emperor Yohanis, the salt route as well as the traditional northern route was diverted to the town. Since then the salt trade route seems to have shifted westwards. From Meqele, leaving Cheleqot and Hintalo to the left, it went through Deбри to Samre, Finarwa and Soqota.¹⁰ Thus, Meqele as a political center was linked to pre-existing networks of local as well as long-distance trade.

The fact that Meqele was closer to the salt mines than the other market towns (Cheleqot and Hintalo) of Inderta must have had its own impact on the new importance given to the town. Meqele also had a central geographical position in Inderta Awraja which might have made the town easily accessible to all Indertan salt traders.¹¹ It is also interesting to note that the extension of a fairly organised administration (since it continued to serve as the capital of eastern Tigray) seems to have given additional impetus to the growth of the town as a trading center in the area.

Thus, Meqele assumed the role of a very important center of commerce, eclipsing old centers like Agulai, Hintalo and Cheleqot. As a result most Indertan salt bewers began to unload their salt in Meqele town. This in turn attracted other traders to come to the town for the salt bars. Although initially the town was not able to attract

many traders, eventually the long-distance traders began to frequent the salt market of the town.¹² This became evident mainly beginning from the end of the nineteenth century, a period characterized by the development of trade and trade routes.

Besides, at this time, the importance of the amole as a means of exchange increased and this had its own impact on the importance of Meqele town as a distribution center of the salt bars. According to James McCann:

The critical role of salt in both exchange and production lies in its dual function. First it was consumed by both human and livestock populations for dietary and medical purposes ... second, salt was a commodity useful in exchange to supplement Maria Teresa thalers, cloth and cartridges. Salt bars and pieces of them were particularly important as currency in small transactions with low value per unit costs, contributing one link between long-distance trade and local exchange. Salt when preserved also served as a means of accumulating wealth. Although prices of the Maria Teresa thaler fluctuated during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, salt rose in value relative to other goods well into the 1900-1935 period.¹³

The growing importance of Meqele's salt market was in line with the above fact. Moreover, the relatively lower price of the amole in Meqele in relation to the markets further south seems to have made many traders (mainly from the south) to frequent the market of Meqele town. It is true that the further one goes away from the source of the amole the higher the price. There is evidence to show that at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century the number of amoles exchanged for a dollar continued to fall. While at the last quarter of the nineteenth century between 50 to 60 amole were given for a thaler, in the last decade of the same century the rate at Meqele was around 25 amole per thaler.¹⁴ In the first decade of the twentieth century from 10 up to 16 amole were exchanged for a thaler.¹⁵ And in the

last two decades of our period the average price at Meqele was 13 and sometimes 10 per thaler.¹⁶ When it went further south (e.g. Gogjam), it is reported to have some times reached to about 5 or 4 pieces per thaler.¹⁷

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the rate of exchange differed according to the season. It was higher at the beginning and the end of the mining season while relatively low at the middle.¹⁸ In any case the price at Meqele had a significant difference from the markets located further south. According to Pankhurst the average profit of a mule load from Meqele to Soqota was between 12 to 20 dollars.¹⁹ Many traders from the south regularly journeyed to Meqele market with a couple of mules for its transportation to the south was a relatively profitable enterprise.

It seems ■ have been due to the influx of many southern merchants to the town that Dejazmach Abraha found it necessary to build a camping site for traders in Meqele town. The site was called jibrouk and was constructed near Abraha's town (in the present Meqele stadium).²⁰ This in turn encouraged many itinerant merchants to visit the town and make extended stays there. Moreover, with the development of trade with Eritrea in the early years of our century, many southern merchants found their way to Meqele town not only in search of the salt bars but also of foreign products. It was due to the above-mentioned different but interrelated factors that Meqele town was able to attract long-distance traders. Thus, the first important premise in regard to the evolution of Meqele town as a market center is that it was at the center of both the salt trade and the people who kept this trade in motion.

Trade with other parts of Ethiopia

The traders of northern Wallo from their celebrated market centers of Soqota and Lalibela came to Meqele and took salt bars to the southern part of the country. Agaw traders were dominant in the trade between Meqele and the south. In the words of the oral sources "when they entered Meqele town the Agaw traders look like a large size of convoy".²¹ Indeed Soqota in Wag served as a spring board for the traders of western, southern and central Ethiopian regions who used to come to Meqele market. As a result the Main salt trade route between Meqele and the larger part of the country was the Meqele - Soqota route. Mules were the Main, if not the only, means of transport, since the deep canyons along the route made the passage difficult for camels.²²

The route from Meqele to Soqota passed through Debri, Adikolo, Fesasi, Samre, Finarwa, Zamra/Tsirare, and then Soqota. Some merchants took another route and travelled through Debri, Dansa, Mai Dongolat, Mai Dabaiba, Adi Giba, Samre, Aila Shagalu, Finarwa, Zamra/Tsirare and reach Soqota. An almost similar route is described by Guida. And in both routes the traders seems to have passed through Samre, Finarwa, Zamra/Tsirare and Soqota. From Finarwa the traders used two different ways to reach Soqota. Those who started their journey leftward crossed the rivers of Zamra and Tsirare at different points while others travelled in a westward direction, crossing Zamara and Tsirare at one point.²³

Oral sources reveal that there were five customs posts where from one up to two *amodea* were paid for each load. The customs posts were located in Dongolat, Adi

Giba, Adi Abterom, Finarwa and Soqota. The most important salt markets of the time were Meqele, Hintalo, Samre, Finarwa and Soqota. The traders used to arrange their journey according to the days of the weekly markets of the above centers. The market of Meqele was held on Monday, Hintalo on Wednesday, Samre on Saturday and Soqota on Tuesday.²⁴ Soqota was an important point of intersection of many routes which came from the east, west, south and south-west. From Soqota some traders went to Begemdir through Amda Worq and Mari Barba. According to Annaratone the routes from Soqota to Gondar were two. One was Soqota, Darila, Yifag, Ambachara and the other was through Ifag, Mairaba Mariam and Ambabir. From Begemdir the route went to Gojjam and further south to Wallaga and Illubabour.²⁵

The traders who came from Soqota to Meqele followed the same route until they reached Samre. After Samre they may use two separate paths to reach Meqele. One was Samre, Fasasi, Dongolai, Adi kolo, Adi Hutsa, Deбри then Meqele. Others, however, travelled eastward i.e. Samre, Hareqo Hintalo, Dur Ambassa, Chelegot, Qelamino and then Meqele.²⁶ In this way, salt, the principal product of northern Ethiopia, reached as far as the Omotic and Oromo kingdoms in the south-west part of the country. Thus, the first thing the salt trade did to Meqele was to make the town the main distribution center of the amole for a large part of the country.

The basic demand for salt in the whole country has necessarily stimulated a complementary movement in the opposite direction of primary products from the south, south west, northwest and central provinces. The flow of agricultural products from south to north was greatly encouraged by the development of trade in northern Ethiopia mainly in the last two decades of our period.

It is true that the transfer of political power from the north to the south led to the shift of the Gibe trade from the Massawa ■ the Zaila route. But this did not result in the total decline of trade and trade routes in the northern part of the country. Indeed there was a conducive ground for the development of the long-distance trade between northern and central Ethiopia. This was Mainly due to the presence of the Italians in Eritrea and the British in the Sudan. The trade with the Sudan was conducted along the Metema route. However, after the establishment of the colony of Eritrea this route gave precedence to the traditional eastern route which went through Inderta and Agame to Asmara and Massawa. According to Pankhurst this is confirmed in a Britishh document in 1900 which states that "Massawa had taken the place formerly occupied by Metema."²⁷

As a result, let alone the traders of the eastern part of the country (Tigray and Wallo), those from Gojjam and Gondar began to trade more with Asmara than with Metema. The fact that many foreign products (both in quantity and quality) were available in Asmara had its own impact on the growing importance of trade with Eritrea.²⁸ Meqele was located at the center of the route which went to Asmara through Addigrat and Adi Qeih. Thus the town began to accommodate a large number of agricultural commodities which were transported to Eritrea. It also started to serve as a transit point for the imported goods of the colony to southern Ethiopia. This resulted in the development of trade and trade routes which connected Meqele town with different places.

Again here Seqota played an intermediary role between Meqele and the southern regions of the country. Merchants from Gojjam and Gondar traded up to Seqota. Then

the Agaws brought the agricultural commodities to the long-distance merchants of Meqele town.²⁹ Although many southern traders were able to penetrate the markets of Adi Qeih and Asmara, most of them returned from Meqele. On their return they took amoles and imported products. The commodities brought by the traders of Soqota were coffee, hides and skins, grain, teff, butter, honey, cattle, pepper, sheep, goats etc. ³⁰ these coffee, hides and skins, butter, grain and teff were brought in large quantities.

Meqele also benefited from its geographical position to become the transit point for agricultural products to the colony of Eritrea. It was surrounded by the agriculturally rich areas of Tembien, Inderta as well as Raya and Azebo. Oral sources attribute the development of Meqele town both as a market and urban center to the rich agricultural lands of its surroundings. Areas around Meqele and the products they were known for are the following: Yeju-grain and pepper; Raya-grain, cattle, hides and skins and pack animals; the Afar lowlands-cattle, goat and camels; Tembien honey; Selewa grain; and Inderta Lin seeds.³¹

The route between Meqele and Weldiya in Yeju passed through Cheleqot, Adi Gudem, Bet mera, Adi Shibu, Maichew, korem, Alamata and Qobo. The Guida mentions an almost identical route between Meqele and Weldiya.³² A place called Jirana around Weldiya was the Main source of pepper for Meqele market which was dominated by Muslim traders. From Weldiya some traders proceeded to Boru and Dese which were important market centers in southern Wallo. Other products such as coffee, hides and skins as well as pack animals were also brought from Yeju.³³

There was also another important route between Meqele and Maichew. Indertian merchants from Meqele travelled to Maichew through Qelamino, Haiq hilet, Adi Gudem, Mai Nabri, Betmera, 'Atsela, Gebar, Maichew and further to Mekoni. A market place in Mekoni called Inqurbeta (or Qorbeta) was the main center of hides and skins. From Inqurbeta one route went to Chercher and another to Alamata.¹⁶ Mekoni was also the source of lowland cattle and pack animals. The Afar sold their cattle and camels in Mekoni and these were then brought to Meqele market by traders both from Meqele and Raya and Azebo.¹⁷ Indeed Meqele market used to accommodate large number of pack animals in its long history. The fact that camels and mules were the main means of transport for Indertian salt traders explains the above fact.

Indertians used to invest most of their capital in salt transport animals. According to Dan Bauer "an Indertian household buys camels after [only] having one good yoke of oxen and a couple of fertile cows, rather than buy more oxen and expand its farming activity."¹⁸ This is confirmed by the oral sources. Although informants fail to give us the price of pack animals at Meqele market, it is believed that the price of a camel was almost double that of a mule. The fact that camels have longer working life and carry a larger amount of salt than mules could explain the above fact.¹⁷ Be that as it may, informants stated that the pack animals were at the root of the stagnant nature of the Indertian economy.¹⁹ The capital investment in pack animals was risky in nature. Diseases, theft and skirmishes with the Afar were some of the factors which added to the cost of Indertian households.²⁰ In any case the market of pack animals was the second largest market place after the salt in Meqele town.

The trade between Meqele and the districts of Raya and Azebo also fostered the flow of cattle to Meqele town. Mainly huge oxens called gonje were brought in large quantities to Meqele town to be eventually transported to Asmara.⁴⁰ Besides Indenian households benefitted from the cattle market of Meqele which was also supplied by the north-western parts of the country. McCann clearly explains this as follows:

the movement of salt, mined in Tigray into long-distance trade networks and northern Wallo's intermediary role drew oxen and cattle out of high-production areas such as Gojjam, Fogora, Begemder, and Yeju in to the oxen-poor regions of northern Wallo and Tigray. The salt trade and early forms of local commercial capitalism therefore helped sustain the local production base, albeit precariously.⁴¹

Thus, for the above reasons the market of Meqele was able to draw a large amount of agricultural and livestock products. In the market of Meqele merchants of each region met merchants from Sogota, Yeju, Gojjam, Gondar, Tembien, Selewa, Inderta and Eritrea. All this seems to have resulted in the growth and development of trade between Meqele and Asmara. The Italians in Eritrea also gave great emphasis to the flourishing of commercial activities between the colony and other parts of Ethiopia in which Meqele town played a pivotal role. This became evident mainly in the last two decades of our period.

Trade with the colony of Eritrea

As is widely known by the beginning of the twentieth century, Italian colonial interest in Ethiopia was revived. Ethiopia was considered as the hinterland of the colony in the general policy of natural resources exploitation. For economic purposes, northern Ethiopia was considered as an extension of Eritrea⁴² as Tekeste Negash puts

it.⁴² Hence, since the second decade of this century and throughout the 1920's and 1930's trade between Eritrea and northern Ethiopia expanded considerably. Mainly from 1920 onwards the Italian colonial government gave great emphasis to and encouraged trade between the colony and the south. Merchants in Asmara were free of duty and were not forced to exchange commodities they took for imported items. Besides, the Italians provided a resting place in Asmara with some facilities for merchants.⁴³

Furthermore, Ras Gugsa Araya was interested in the development of trade between Meqele and Asmara. He created good relations with the Italian authorities in Asmara. He also used to encourage many Italians to participate in the trade. Although many written sources fail to mention it, oral sources hint that there was an Italian commercial agent in Meqele town.⁴⁴ It was in this period that the trade between Asmara and Meqele showed unprecedented growth. This will become clearer if we look at the nature of the trade between the two towns in the last years of our period.

Groups of merchants often known as gaḥlay having organised themselves and elected a negadras from among the rich merchants. An example of this was Negadras Gabru for christians and Negadras Dubale for Muslims.⁴⁵ The responsibility of a negadras was multifarious. He would announce in advance the day of departure. It was his task to fix the hours of departure, choose the halting places, distribute firearms among his fellow caravaneers and intervene in disputes. He was also the one who paid taxes on behalf of the gaḥlay in route. Informants stated that the number of loaded mules and asses were registered in the name of the negadras.⁴⁶

Merchants from Meqele destined to Eritrea follow the route Meqele, Agulai/FalagMatai, Guaharat, Adi Woizero, Negash, Adi Abagi, Singata, Idaga Hamus, Adigrat, Fiqada, Zalambas a, Inda Gabir Kokebay. They spent most of the night at Falag Maiat, Negash, Singata, Idaga Hamus, Adigrat and Inda Gabir Kokebay. Inda Gabir Kokebay was the border town between the colony and Ethiopia. Here the Italians had a large kella, where the name of the negadras, the number of animals and commodities were registered. After having finished loading, they proceeded to Senafe, Adi Qeth, Mai Seraw, Deqemhare and then Asmara.⁴⁷

When the traders entered the colony they received a warm welcome from the Italian commercial authorities. Merchants who were responsible for a large quantity of items were given the title of a negadras by the Italian authorities. Oral sources state that about fifteen titles of negadras were given annually, in addition to clothes, firearms and other awards. In most cases a pistol or hambar wechefo with 100 bullets were given to the leaders of the gallay (mostly negadras)⁴⁸. The Italians were mainly interested in hides and skins, grain, butter and oilseeds. As a result there was a kind of competition between the negadras to transport a large quantity of the favoured products (mainly hides and skins) to Asmara. McCann's argument will help to enlighten us on this issue:

"The Italian colony of Eritrea provided a major stimulus for trade and drew much of the north into its hegemony. The advance of a cash economy in Tigray and northern Begemder resulted largely from the demand for labour and foodstuffs in Eritrea where Italian investment in infrastructure and nascent agribusiness was high. Eritrean agents at Dose, Meqele, and Adwa competed vigorously with Addis Ababa in this [hides] trade"⁴⁹

Most Indertan merchants began to involve themselves in the trade of hides and skins. And the statistics of the 1900-1935 period show that hides and skins remained the principal export to Eritrea. This, followed by hunter and mother of pearl was to remain the chief export, coming to the value in 1921 of 8,778,720 dollars. Nevertheless, Coffee, grain, honey, pepper, livestock and linseed were also considered as favoured products in the colony.⁵⁰

The commodities merchants bought at Asmara included cotton and silk cloths, abujedid, zeha, metal instruments like maresha and knives, ornaments like kuhli (used to decorate the eyes) and mahubab (thread tied around the neck). Other items such as soap, matches, water bottles and incense were also brought to Meqele town. Mainly abujedid and cotton yarn were transported in large quantities.⁵¹ Indeed Abujedid remained the largest imported commodity followed by cotton yarn and other textile products. The other principal products were medicine, petrol, hosiery, spirits and agricultural tools.⁵²

On their return journey traders followed the same route. Traders of Gondar and Gojjam who went to Asmara through Adwa also returned to their places through Meqele, to take the amoles.⁵³ Besides the route from Asmara to Gondar sometimes converged around Inticho and those who wanted to bring amoles took the Inticho, Abi Adi, Gembella and Meqele route.⁵⁴ On their return the traders were liable to duties at the customs posts found in the south of the colony. According to oral sources Addigrat was the main customs post between Asmara and Meqele. At Addigrat the traders sometimes spent two days to display their products.⁵⁵ But informants fail to recall the amount of taxes paid at Addigrat. The only written mention about this is by Martini

Martini states that one and two thalers were paid for a mule load of abujedid at Addigrat and Meqeale respectively. And a mule load of coffee was taxed three thalers in Meqeale and two thalers in Addigrat.¹⁶ Informants on the other hand stress that the amount of taxes paid were higher at Addigrat than at Meqeale.

From Meqeale the imported products were distributed to the different parts of the country. So, well into the 1900-1935 period Meqeale's position as a center of mercantile activity linked the town to the wider movements of goods between the colony and entrepôts further south.

The above discussions show that Meqeale was able to draw the attention of both local and long-distance trade routes. (see fig. n.3). Thus, favourable conditions could be said to have existed for Meqeale's growth into an important market center. The main market area of Meqeale was found on the site of the present buildings of Bazar and the bank. The Bazar was the site of a salt market while the bank area was that of cattle and pack animals. The area behind the bank served as a place where imported products mainly abujedid was exchanged. To the east of the Bazar agricultural products such as honey, butter and pepper were sold. The transactions of grain, telt and rifles was conducted near the present Menen Hotel (to the east of the bank). The vast area to the south of the market was called Inda Komaro (area or quarter of mesheta owners) which is now called Inda Abay Fiqadu or qebele¹⁴. And the small area very close to the Menen Hotel was called Riga Hayamat i.e. quarter of prostitutes.¹⁷

The market of Meqeale was the most important node of settlement. The economic life of the residents of Meqeale town was highly dependent on the market

Although Meqele bears similar features with other Ethiopian market centers, it had its own unique place as a market which specialized in the salt trade. Besides, both oral and written sources show that the rich market of Meqele was venue of exchange for agricultural products and salt bars. Travellers who visited Meqele town in our period generally stress the existence of a rich market in which salt, agricultural products and manufactured goods were found in abundance. They further witnessed the industriousness of the people of Meqele and its surroundings.

The travellers of the nineteenth century like Wylde and Berkeley only observed the presence of a salt market in the town. Berkeley further states that "Meqele is endowed with a real importance as being the market town of the country sufficiently fertile to provide food even for a large Shewan army."⁴⁸ Those who visited the town in the early twentieth century have left us similar descriptions about the items found in Meqele market apart from salt. Martini, Franchetti, Pollera, Zaghi, Annaratone and Decastro state that Meaqele had a big market where one can find many agricultural and manufactured goods. Again all of them including Almagia and Nesbitt (who visited the town in 1935) reveal that the major portion of the slat produced in the Afar lowlands found its way to the market of Meqele.⁴⁹

In addition, Annaratone and Decastro have left us some information about the life of the inhabitants of the town, which was greatly influenced by the market. Both of them agree that the town had a fairly large population which led a good life due to

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the prosperous salt trade." Annaratone seems to have witnessed the presence of many local and imported products in the market of Meqele town. He wrote

Macalle, vasto e popolato da gente poco buona, e prospero e ricco pei suoi commerci ... Importantissimo e il mercato, specialmente del sale ed e ricco di tutti i prodotti commerciali che l'Abissinia esporta dalla colonia nostra ■ v'importa.⁶¹

We do not have written sources about the last years of our period. Oral sources, however, state that in its history the market of Meqele was rich and mainly in the few years before the Italians "every thing in the country was found in the market of Meqele." They further reveal that when the Italians occupied the town they used to say "all goods are found in the market of Meqele"⁶² Thus, we can safely argue that Meqele was a growing market center in the period under discussion.

4.2. THE INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF URBAN Meqele

As discussed already, salt was an essential feature of Inderian economy which tied Meqele town with its surroundings. Many urbanists stress that the support of any town depends on the services it performs for a tributary area.⁶³ And the economic life of every town is inextricably interwoven with the economic life of its surroundings. Dickinson states that the very essence of urban character is the function of service for a tributary area and "cities do not grow up of themselves. Countrysides set them up to do tasks that must be performed in central places."⁶⁴ It was in line with this that the market of Meqele brought the "peasant - traders" of the various villoges around it.

Salt was brought to the town by the Indertan villagers. And a large number of people in the town in one way or another participated in the economic activities emanating from the salt trade. People gather in urban agglomerations in order to carry on certain activities and satisfy certain needs which can not be performed or satisfied otherwise. This could be the reason why many people drifted to Meqelet town and settled around the market. And the very fact that Meqelet had a large market meant that it attracted a significant ratio of migrants from far away places. Here we come to the role of markets in the development of towns. Tringham says that "trade has also stimulated the development of cities in many parts of the world, sometimes in infertile regions where great effort is even required to feed a large population".⁴⁵ The life of the inhabitants of Meqelet town was in line with this general fact as the town was the main salt trading center.

The first settlers around the market were the female tej and tella sellers as well as petty traders. Then came the Muslims of Indertan villages. Gradually many Muslims from other places came to the town and settled near the market as traders. Other traders also built houses in between the women and the muslim quarters. One can find in Meqelet town many people who migrated from Tembien, Agame, Raya and Azebo, Seqota, Yeju and even Gondar.⁴⁶ Another group in the town which depended a great deal on the market was the local elite. There were also a significant number of "farmer-traders" who lived in sefers like Mai Luham

"Trade was the main economic bond which tied the different people in the town. The majority of the heads of the household were to be found in one of the following occupations: 'farmer-traders', petty traders, merchants, administrative and military

officials as well as servants of the church. All of them tended to blend into one another. The "farmer-traders" brought salt, petty traders and merchants bought and transferred salt and other products, the women sold local beer to the traders and the church and administrative officials levied taxes on the traders.

The "farmer-traders" (like their fellow Indertan villagers) were part-time traders since their participation in the salt trade was seasonal in character. This could be the reason why many informants who lived in the town in the early twentieth century replied both farmer and trader when asked about their occupation. But as residents of the town they had closer relationship with the market and the trading population than the majority of Indertan salt traders. With the development of trade most of them turned to be full-time traders.⁶⁷

The main group of traders who settled around the market were the Muslims. But there were significant number of Christians within them. Most of these traders were active in the long-distance trade. Their center being Megele they travelled to different market centers of Wollo as far as Addis Ababa in the south and Asmara in the north. They enabled the residents of the town and its surroundings to obtain the necessary items from Megele market rather than going to far-off places.⁶⁸

The petty traders' group was made up of two sectors. First there were those who went about selling at the weekly or daily *gullii* market, where housewives bought small quantities of vegetables, grain, teff, butter, honey, pepper, spices, crushed salt, etc. The second and larger category which could be considered as the service sector, was made up of women brewing and selling traditional beer. With the development of

trade and the growth of the town this sector expanded considerably. The mesketa business owners began to play many roles, as drinking houses and prostitution as well as informal market centers.

The other category of social strata which directly or indirectly benefited from the trade was the local elite. The role of the local rulers in surplus accumulation has been already discussed. And of course, being economically powerful, the local rulers were to play an important role in the development of socio-economic activities of Meqele town. The officials of the gedam of Medhani Alem for instance played a pivotal role in the socio-economic life of the town. An examination of the church community of Meqele town in relation to their role in surplus accumulation and administrative affairs could be another way of looking at the internal dynamics of Meqele town as a trading center.

It is known that one of the communities which developed in Meqele town was that of the clergy or the kahinat. The main source of income for the kahinat of the gedam was the salt trade and the market of Meqele town. They had also a sizable income from fines on transactions and judicial matters as well as distribution of land.

According to McCann:

"Daber in theory, and to a great extent in practice, controlled their own tax collection and assessment, judicial procedures, and imposition of fines; their procedures and decisions answered only to control at the regional level, or in some cases only to the Emperor."⁷⁶

The overall life of the gedam of Madhane Alem in Meqele town was in line with this general fact. As the head of the gedam the mesketa geger was the chief

administrator of the town. For instance, under Ras Gugsa Melake Genet Tesfay was the head of the town. He appointed his agents, judges and sefer shums. The agent of Melake Genet Tesfay was a man called Blatta Begay. Under him were Bashay Gebregziabihar (wenber i.e. judge) and two Chiqashums. The two Chiqashums were responsible for the western (muslim area) and eastern part of the town.⁷¹

The chiqa shums were responsible for the Maintenance of peace and order in their respective areas. They were assisted by the wenber of the town (who made his office around the market). The wenber had the power to pass orders for the detention of any wrong-doer up to a month. In such cases the guards of Ras Gugsa were helpful since they used to patrol the market area. There was a prison below the market place headed by a man called Dejazmach Abraha Mezegebe.⁷² Serious matters were reported to the melake genet through Blatta Tsegay. If there were any further appeal, it had to reach the court of the ras which used to be held in the palace once a week. Mainly, cases of homicide, political and military nature were directly handled by the ras along with the three wenabir of the palace.⁷³ Fines were collected by the town wenber and chiqa shums for the officials of the gedam.

The major source of income for the gedam was, however, the customs dues collected from Berähle and toll-gate as well as market dues of Meqele town. The socio-economic hierarchy of the gedam was separate from the administrative hierarchy. Here the metigata and the eight lige diagonal were the ones who served as assistants of the melake genet. They were also the ones responsible for the collection of taxes and market dues.⁷⁴

It is mentioned that the gedam of Madhane Alem had a sizable income from the salt customs dues collected at Berahle. 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ of the dues collected at Berahle was allocated to the gedam of Madhani Alem in Meqele and the adbarat of Lik qeqema and Inda Aba Hadera in Tembien. Two-thirds out of the 10% was given to the gedam of Medhani Alem.⁷⁵ The gedam also collected toll-gate taxes from the salt traders who entered the town. Each pack animal was liable to pay one geila (amule).⁷⁶ The lige dingonai had women tax collectors called qontaro, who used to pick the dabr's due from the items displayed in the market by cupping their hands. Commodities such as pepper, honey, butter etc. were subject to random assessment by women of whom Wiro Lemlem is noted. She had about four assistants who followed her and collected the assessed products in baskets.⁷⁷ All the products collected from the market were divided among the 165 rim-holders, out of which the melake gengi took the lion's share, i.e. 10%.⁷⁸

The officials of the gedam also had a sizable income from any transaction made between two parties. It was called nay dilal and mainly taxed on cattle and pack animals. The other source of income was the residence fee called nay tish in which each household paid one geila annually. Any one who received land in the town was liable to pay one geila to the gedam. The nay tish and payments on land distribution were collected by the Chigashums.⁷⁹ Indeed the most important role played by the gedam was in the transaction and transfer of land. Land sales were conducted under the strict supervision of the gedam officials.

All land sales were registered in the tsik me'ezch of Kidana Mihar church in the presence of the matigeta and the lige dingonai. Both the seller and the buyer (mostly

the buyer) usually pay 6.00 to the riste mezegeb for the services given by the gedam. Two birt was given to the secretary (mostly with the title of lqe mezeimiran), one birt to the lga bet, one to the melake gepet and the remaining one to the merigela.³¹ Church manuscripts show that more than seventy land sales and transfers were made in our period.³² This could lead us to assume that the circulation of money, the mobility of people and the socio-economic activities in the town were remarkable. Besides, Crumney states that a connection seems to exist between the growth of towns and the buying and selling of land.³³

Thus, the gedam had an overall jurisdiction over the socio-economic and administrative life of the town. Of all things it had a large income from the salt trade and the market of Meqele town. Being dissatisfied by the large amount of money raised by the gedam, Ras Gugsa is reported to have said 'የእባቴን ስርዓት እላረርክዎ ብሮ እንጂ ቢያንስ የጦጥሉ ገበያ ቀረጥ ለከተው ግልጽ ጦጥላ ነበረበት'። From this we can understand that the local rulers did not dare change the status quo and the overall jurisdiction of the gedam over the town continued unchallenged until the Italian period.

Although churches were considered as obstacles to modern urbanisation, the surplus accumulated by the gedam no doubt had its own contribution to the ensuing diversification of the economic life of the town. According to Tringham, competition over resources was one of the factors leading to the development of towns. Crumney also agrees with this argument. And of course the accumulated surplus must have enabled the kahinai to meet their household needs. Besides, the economic resources of the gedam supported church personnel and activities including church education in the

The above shows that the economic life of the residents of Meqele's population was engaged in non-agricultural activities. This was further strengthened by the long-distance trade and the growing commercial activity with the colony of Eritrea. This in turn led to the emergence of big merchants in Meqele town. The magnitude and volume of trade with Asmara was too large for the local traders alone to deal with it. As a result in the last years of our period foreign merchants began to open big commercial establishments

The Greeks were the first ■ open a big aregi distribution and processing center in Meqele town. The Greek merchants called Clantis, Banaye and Qusli were engaged in the trade of aregi from Asmara to Meqele. They hired many workers and brought the undistilled (diidif) aregi to Meqele town by mules. A mule load carried from four to five gerewaynas of aregi. Then it was distilled to become a fine type of aregi in Meqele town. The house of Inda Clantis (a big hall which has now been turned in to the Tigray Sport and Cultures Bureau) was the center of aregi making and distribution. In order to produce fine aregi about seven gereweyna (jerry can - 20 litres container) of water was mixed with one gereweyna of diidif aregi. One gereweyna of aregi was sold for four to five thalers. As a result Meqele assumed a new and additional role, that of the distribution center for aregi. And in the late 1920's Meqele witnessed a boom in aregi trade ^{as}

It was also in this period that Meqele added one social group labourers (mainly women) emerged in the aregi factory of Inda clantis. There were also many workers who served as porters as well as aregi traders in the town and its surroundings. There were also people who became rich by working with the Greeks. Of these Azmad

Gchresillaste and Abay Gahru are famous. Later on they were able to open their own groceries where areqi and other alcoholic products were on sale.⁵⁶ Areqi began to compete with tej and tella. The spread of cash economy in the area encouraged the development of areqi trade. Even in the rural areas and at agricultural fields of Inderta areqi was consumed in large quantities.⁵⁷

The second group of foreign merchants were the Arabs called Mohamad Kakia and Abay Yasin. They monopolized the trade of hides and skins from Meqele to Asmara. They also brought textiles such as abuiddid and zaha from Asmara and sent it to the south. They established a big store for the distribution of hides and skins around the muslim quarter. Since the local traders generally lacked the experience as well as the capital, they had to start by attaching themselves to wealthy foreign merchants. People like Abay Usman started business as hired workers and assistants of the Arabs but gradually they were able to move into big business themselves. These merchants were mainly successful in hides trade and were called magado qorbol.⁵⁸

There was also an Italian called Lensini Domenico who opened a retail shop of textile products in Meqele town in the late 1920's. Not only did he make himself active in the trade between Asmara and Meqele but he also went to the extent of establishing big stores around Menen Hotel. He distributed large quantities of textile products to Meqele and its surroundings as well as to towns further south.⁵⁹ This also brought about the emergence of big local textile merchants and the expansion of the textile trade. A good example is a man called Dubale Tam who opened a textile products shop near Menen Hotel and became wealthy.⁶⁰ Apart from the emergence of big local traders the presence of foreign merchants in Meqele town led to the diversification of

the economic life of the town. The foreigners were also to add to the number of "urbanised" residents of the town.

The Urban Complex and its Features

The trade with Asmara and the development of commercial activities led to the expansion of the socio-economic activities in the town. The close relationship with an area (Eritrea) with a high degree of urbanization and external influence brought about the development of Meqele town as an urban center. Tringham makes this point clear:

"Long-distance commerce, often between more and less elaborately organised societies, has been shown to play a large part in town development whether as permanent staging or transshipment posts, or as "temporary towns" as some of the great fairs or markets might be called."⁹¹

The introduction of new features of urbanisation in Meqele town could partly be explained by the above fact. It was in the last decade of our period that Meqele witnessed a differentiation of the type of houses. Until this period the majority of houses in the town were traditional in character. They were of two types: the nukul, locally called guil, and the stone houses with flat roof of earth known as hidmo. Only the churches and the palace constituted big structures. With the development of trade and the increase in the proportion of new comers to the town, Ras Gugsa found it necessary to create new rules and regulations about the construction of houses.⁹²

The reg declared that any person who received land would have to construct a house on the land within six months. The kind of house to be constructed was also specified. Those who built a good hidmo house within the specified time were

considered as a nistegna over the land. On the other hand those who built a simple gupp house were forced to demolish it since it was considered like a tent.⁴⁰ All this shows the large number of people who entered the town at the time. It also shows the urbanizing trends of the local rulers which must have been the product of the growing commercial activities of the town as well as the influence of Eritrea.

Tradition also tells us that Ras Gugsa encouraged new comers to build good houses by giving incentives in cash. Those who were able to construct a house and dig water in their compound were given fifty birr as a gursha by the ras.⁴¹ Although the amount of money given to the settlers seems exaggerated it nonetheless indicates the attention given by the ras to the urban growth of Meqele town. It was also in this period that houses with corrugated iron sheets began to emerge in the town. Oral sources attribute this to the trade with Asmara. Corrugated iron sheets were brought by the gaflays and were sold at Meqele. Both local and foreign merchants were the first to use the iron sheets as roofs in the newly built houses.⁴²

The first local trader who built a house with corrugated iron sheets was a man called Bashay Gebretakle. Then followed people like Aba Guben, Blatta Abay, Abay Fiqadu, Negadras Woldegiorgis, Alu Gebremedhin, Dejazmach Kinfe and Azmach Gebresillasie. Indeed, Abay Fiqadu and Negadras Woldegiorgis built two-storeyed houses. The foreign merchants were also able to construct big houses with corrugated iron sheets. According to informants there were about fifteen such houses in Meqele town before the coming of the Italians. Besides, the office of the telegraph in Meqele which was constructed in the 1910's as well as the large residence built by Ras Gugsa in Mar Lihim seffer had roofs of corrugated iron sheets.⁴³

The development of trade with Asmara and the south also contributed to the growth of Meqele town in many ways. On the one hand, as the town had a rich market and used to play an intermediary role many people used Meqele as a staging point. Consequently the town became a center for both salt, agricultural products and manufactured goods. A good part of the economic activities in the town began to cater to non-local demands. Thus the nodality of the town made it not only an exchange place for products of various regions but also the meeting point for people of different areas. It also fostered the migration of many people to the town, thereby contributing to an increase in its economic activity.

The relatively good standard of life which the market and the growing trade brought in ■ the town was one factor for immigration into the town. According to

Gerald Breese:

"People migrate to presumably where living standards are higher than they are accustomed ■ in the country. Rural residents learn to want more of what the city has and they view with great interest the reported higher income and other rumoured good life in the town."

The situation of Meqele town in the last years of our period was in line with the above statement. Informants stress that Meqele had a rich market, and life in the town was very attractive to rural people. The following poem in use at the time clearly confirms this point:

አጋ እገጉሐጥጉ ሐክላ (ጎልጥጥ)
There is no flesh like Hiakale (qiltum)

ግሊ እገጉሐጥጉ ሙጥላ
and there is no country like Meqele "

As a result many people came to the town not only from the surrounding places but also from much further. And most of them were largely attracted by trade as well as the rumored prosperous life in the town. Here the main problem is that we do not have any reliable evidence which shows the exact number of population Meqele had at the time. Although Almagia says that at the time of the Italian invasion of 1935 the town had only 3,000 inhabitants,¹⁰⁰ it is difficult to accept his estimation for many reasons.

To start with, forty years before Almagia's report Meqele reportedly had around 10,000 inhabitants. So far, to our knowledge, nothing happened to the town in those years which might have wiped out 3/4 of its inhabitants. Later in 1938 Guida mentions that the population of Meqele was around 12,000. It is difficult to imagine an increase of 9,000 people within only three years. On the other hand, according to informant of 9,000 people within only three years.¹⁰⁰ And from the general Qatekristos, in 1928 E.C., the town had 12,000 inhabitants.¹⁰⁰ And from the large situation of the development of trade and the growth of the town as well as the large area it covers, Meqele must have sheltered more than 3,000 people, probably between 5-10,000 inhabitants.

Be that as it may, it was during the last years of our period that Meqele started to accommodate another social stratum in its socio-economic setting. These were the daily labourers who loaded and unloaded salt and other goods around the market. Besides, a significant number of weavers began to emerge in the muslim quarter near the old mosque.¹⁰¹ Both the labourers, weavers and new traders were to contribute to the further concentration of people in the town and the diversification of urban economic life. This in turn seems to have necessitated the establishment and expansion

of diverse urban services and the emergence of others. The opening and expansion of such service houses was one of the features of urbanisation and its consequences.¹⁰³ One of the diverse economic activities which developed at the time was catering. This included tella, tej, arraqi and butchery houses as well as restaurants.

The existence of mesheta houses in Meqele town was an old phenomenon. From its foundation, Meqele had a large number of female tella and tej sellers. And with the development of trade and the growth of the town the local taverns also flourished. The mesheta houses were also the earliest eating establishments in the town. Most of these houses had large compounds and served as resting places for the long-distance traders. The influx of traders into the town increased to such an extent that the camping site as well as the market place could not cope with it. The Agaw traders were particularly large in number and most of them found their way to the mesheta houses. They used to sleep and eat or prepare their foods there.¹⁰⁴

Sometimes the traders of the south used to reach Meqele town before the arrival of the salt caravan from Arba. As a result they had to wait for some time in the mesheta houses. Many people frequented the mesheta houses because they served at the same time as first-hand market places since commodities were bought at lower prices before reaching the market (which was held on Mondays).¹⁰⁵ For their services as resting places, the owners of the mesheta houses received firewood and other items such as honey freely or at very low prices from their customers. Besides they had a good opportunity to sell tej in large quantities to the merchants. According to oral sources the average price of tej in the period under discussion was between thirty to thirty-five

brills per thaler.¹⁰⁶

The mesheta houses also served as informal slave markets. Although they were few in number, the slave merchants concluded their negotiations at the well known tej houses. Of these the houses of Amete Tirso, Iyesus Chago, Tekla Zega, Hadash Deres are now worthy. According to informants a slave boy cost eighty thalers while a slave girl fetched 100 thalers in Meqele town. The slaves were mainly useful for salt transport from Arho to Inderta and many Indertan households were thus owners of slaves.¹⁰⁶ The importance of the mesheta houses increased in response to the development of commerce in Meqele town. And in the last years of our period almost every inch of space in the mesheta houses became marketable.

Traders or customers who used to spend the night in the mesheta houses, with out drinking, were charged one thaler called pay kurrum (kurrum means one who slept wrapped up alone). This term was mainly associated with the mesheta houses where prostitution was practised.¹⁰⁷ The fee paid for pay kurrum clearly show the diversity of economic activities in Meqele town as well as the money-consciousness of its residents. The wider distribution of aregi further intensified the development of mesheta houses and prostitution.

There were also butcheries and imported liquor houses in Meqele town for a good part of our period. The emergence of such houses goes back to the period of Dejazmach Abraha. Abraha had developed urban tastes since he lived in Italy for sometime.¹⁰⁸ This, coupled with the sizable income he had from customs dues, seems to have enabled him to introduce some urban services into the town. He opened a butchery and a bar near the present Menaharriya. Here, raw and roasted meat and wines were sold and Abraha tried to encourage the people of the town to frequent them. To

this effect he even used to invite the mekwanint in order to make them conscious of such services.¹⁰ However, after his departure the butchery and the bar declined. But the lesson he left in the town was long lasting. Later on some people were able to open similar houses around the market. And there was a large butchery and areqj house near Menen hotel before the coming of the Italians. There was also a large hall in one of the rooms of Irda clatus where areqj was sold for customers by measure.¹¹⁰

The other service sector which developed in Meqele town was prostitution. There are indications that an institution akin to prostitution had existed in the town as early as the first decade of this century. Tradition tells us that there was a quarter called Riga Hayamat behind the bazar building. The same tradition further tells us that before the Italians, a small area near Menen hotel was called Idaga Hayamat (market of prostitutes) - (Hayam in Tigrigna means a loose woman).¹¹ At Idaga Hayamat many women with hairs made and well dressed used to wait for clients. But the majority of them lived in the meshbeta houses. At the initial period payments were conducted in the form of salt but gradually changed into thalers. The prostitutes had a large number of customers from among the mekwanint, traders and soldiers.¹¹²

The scope of prostitution increased in the last ten years of our period. The development of trade, the existence of currency, the higher mobility of people as well as the corresponding expansion of local taverns seems to have contributed to the expansion of prostitution as a way of life in Meqele town. According to informants many women, including housewives (divorcing their husbands), came to the town to

engage in the profession. Most of them were from Indertan villages but there were also some from Wag and Samre. Indeed Agaw prostitute like Tirfinesh, Wagaye, Kebedech became famous.¹¹³

Another development of this period, and one which probably added to the development of prostitution was the trade of ategi and other imported products. Informants state that people got too drunk and remained in the mesbeta houses over night. Frequent clashes broke out in the houses of the prostitutes between the traders and the mekwanint.¹¹⁴ Moreover the prostitutes of the town were well dressed and adorned with jewelry brought from Asmara. Oral sources stress that the women in the mesbeta houses used to display distinction and elegance which had its own impact on the expansion of prostitution.¹¹⁵ Moreover, the presence of foreigners as well ■ the close contacts with Asmara must have contributed to the development of the enterprise.

According to informant Birchiko Hagos, the foreigners used to frequent the famous mesbeta houses where prostitution was practised. She further stated that there were many prostitutes who had their own rooms around Menen Hotel (Idaga Hayamat) and others who used to wait for clients around the market. She also revealed that up to ten thalers were paid for the pretty ones while an average prostitute charged from four to five thalers.¹¹⁶ The British reporter E. Wiese who visited the town shortly after it was occupied by the Italians observed around the mesbeta houses about 200 native huts where prostitution was practised as a way of life. He called it the "amusement quarter" and characterizes it as the most noticeable effect of civilization as a result of which the prostitutes gained fine dresses and cosmetics.¹¹⁷

It is true that Italian occupation further stimulated prostitution, but such a large number of prostitutes could not have emerged overnight. And the dresses as well as cosmetics which are mentioned by Wiese as incentives for prostitution had to some extent existed in the town before the Italian occupation. The fact that the town had a large market and a bustling commercial activity was at the back of the socio-economic life of the town. It is already mentioned that life in Meqele town was prosperous mainly in the last years of our period. And the elders of the town remember this period as the "boom period" ¹¹⁴

The town was undoubtedly the main commercial center in the area and a place where money could easily be made and where it circulated highly. The popular

saying ¹¹⁵

መቀሌ ሃብታም አገሮ ነው
ገንድ አለባቸው።

so rich is Meqele
it can adorn even the trees

Clearly shows the ample economic opportunities in Meqele town in the period under discussion. Informants also state that things were cheap in Meqele town. The town was a suitable place for all strata of the society from leader to big trader. Indeed the town is recalled as a place of pleasures

The above-mentioned features of the town, the diversity of the catering services and the alleged prosperous life of Meqele could be summarized by the following

couplet attributed to the last years of the 1920's ¹¹⁶

መቀሌ ሸጋ ነው ስጋ ዘለቀ ሳንጅ
ታንዝ ሩግና ስላፈው ቂጥና ነው አንዚ።

Meqele is a country of ujj and meal
except for the danger of syphilis

From this we can safely conclude that the reason for the continued growth of Meqele must be sought in the economic opportunities emerging there as a result of the prosperous trade. For one thing there were many opportunities for entrepreneurship in both local and long-distance trade. Besides, most of the people of the town had indirect ways of benefitting from the diverse economic activities.

Apart from big commercial establishments, urban service sectors and good and durable houses, in the last few years of our period the town witnessed other more urban-oriented features. It was in the first years of the 1930's that Ras Gugsä introduced a motor car to Meqele town. The car was brought from Asmara in pieces on mule back and was assembled and used in the town until the coming of the Italians. Besides, Ras Gugsä brought a grinding machine to Meqele town. It was a horse-drawn grinding mill and was set up in the present qebele 12.¹²¹ Oral sources further state that shortly before the Italian occupation sewing machines were brought from Asmara. And there were a few tailors around the market.¹²² Thus, before the Italian period Meqele town had various urban features and its residents were relatively more "urbanised" than the other areas around it. And the people of the town were able to appreciate urban values and situations

CHAPTER FOUR

FOOT NOTES

¹Crummey, pp. 13-23; Lewis Mumford, The city in History. Its Origins, Its Transformation and Its Prospects (New York: Harcourt Brace and World Press, 1970), p. 154.

²Ruth Tringham, Peter J Ucko and G W Dimbleby (eds) "Man, Settlement and Urbanism", in proceedings of a meeting in Archaeology and Related Subjects (London: Duck worth, 1972), p. 594

³This is true of towns such as Askum, Harar, Gandar, Adwa etc.

⁴Crummey, p. 135.

⁵Harold M. Mayer and C. F. Kohn (ed.), Readings In Urban Geography (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 85.

⁶S. & J. Comhaire, "Some Aspects of Urbanization in Ethiopia" in the papers of the meeting of social science fieldworkers in North East Africa (Addis Ababa, 1967), p. 3; and many others.

⁷Ibid; Tadesse, p. 116.

⁸F. Alvarez, The Prester John of The Indies v.1 Buckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford (eds.) (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1958) pp. 98-261; M. A. Almeida, Some Records of Ethiopia, 1593-1646. Transf. & ed by C. F. Buckingham and C. W. Huntingford (London: Hakluyt Society, 1954), pp. 44-50. R. Pankhurst, "The Trade of Northern Ethiopia in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in Journal of Ethiopian Studies, v. 2, n. 1. (H.S.I.U. Press, 1964), p. 53; T. Charles Beke, A Diary Written During A Journey In Abyssinia, from August 31, 1840 upto February 5, 1841 in Journal of Geographical Society of London (London: N. P. H., 1844), p. 52.

⁹Ibid, Pearce, p. 123; Clements Markham, A History of Abyssinian Expedition (London: Mathew & Co. Ltd. 1869), pp. 235-40

¹⁰Informants: Bayru, Binega, Gesese

¹¹According to Gerald Breese, Urbanisation In Newly Developing Countries (Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1960), p. 102, site refers to the actual physical characteristics of the location on which a city is built, whereas situation refers primarily to the relationship of a particular site to other parts of the area in which the city is located.

¹²According to Informant Kahsay, in the initial years, the Indertan salt-traders did not unload their salt in Megele town. They used to take it to the markets located further south or to Hinfalo; this was a continuation of past practice

¹³McCann, p. 72

¹⁷Pankhurst, *Economic History*, p. 468.

¹⁸Martini, p. 168

¹⁹Annaratone, p. 387; Informants: Bayru, Mehari, Hadera. According to informant Mehari, at one time around 1933, the price of salt in Meqele town reached 0.50 and 0.75 cents for one ganfur (four amoles)

²⁰Pankhurst, *Economic History*, p. 468. Informants also share the same estimation.

²¹Informants: Bayru, Binega, Mehari, Hadera and others

²²Pankhurst, *Economic History*, p. 468.

²³No informants has been able to tell me the origin and meaning of the word jibrouk. But it seems probable that it has some relationship with gumruk or a place where customs dues or taxes are levied.

²⁴Informants: Bayru, Hagos, Gesese.

²⁵Ibid; McCann, p. 72.

²⁶Informants: Hadara, Haylu, Kase, Gesese; Guida D'Italia Della Consociazione Tyvisica Italiana (Milano: Proprietà letteraria e artistica della C.T.I. 1938), p. 352.

²⁷Informants: Bayru, Hadera, Haylu, Karsay.

²⁸Ibid; Annaratone, pp. 410-13.

²⁹Informants: Haylu, Gesese, Sertsedingil.

³⁰Pankhurst, *Economic History*, p. 390. About the growing importance of trade with Massawa rather than Malama, Abdussamad Haji Ahmad, "Trade and Politics in Gojjam 1882-1935", M.A. thesis in history (A.A.U., 1980), p. 46 and many others.

³¹Abdussamad, p. 46; Informants: Hailu, Kase

³²Ibid; McCann, pp. 71-72.

³³Informants: Haylu, Bayru, Gesese and many others.

³⁴Ibid: Oral sources tend to stress that what makes Meqele a large town was the rich agricultural fields of its environs

³⁵Ibid, Guida, pp. 304-15, Informants: Ahmad, Abdulqadir, Ibrahim

³⁶Informants: Hadera, Gehtegziabihar, Kase, Bayru, Binega, Annaratone, pp. 410-11 mentions that the route from Meqele to Baitumeida was: Meqele, Mai Mesghu, Azebo (Galla, cheberet then Baitumeida)

³⁹Informants Gebrekidm, Ibrahim Berhe. According to the Guida, pp. 305-314 the route was Meqele, Mai Mesgi, Debuhi Matchew, Inqurbeta. Both oral and written sources agree that Inqurbeta in Mekoni was an important market center.

⁴⁰Informants: Bayru, Hailu, Berhe, Ibrahim, Belay, Kindeya.

⁴¹Ibid; Bauer, p. 160.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Informants: Belay, Kindeya, Kahsay.

⁴⁴Ibid; Bauer, pp. 159-162.

⁴⁵Informants: Belay, Kindeya.

⁴⁶McCann, p. 77; Informants also state that due to the development of trade and cash economy the Inderian households used to buy many cattle brought from the central and north-western provinces.

⁴⁷Tekeste Negash, Italian Colonialism In Eritrea, 1987-1941: Policies, Praxis and Impact. Ph.D thesis (stockholm: Uppsals, 1985), p. 40.

⁴⁸Ibid; Abdussamad, p. 46; Informants revealed that there were not taxes all over Eritrea.

⁴⁹Informants: Bayru, Kindeya, Belay, Gasese. According to informant Gesege, the Italian textile merchant called Lensini Domenico was serving as a secret political and commercial agent of the colony. McCann, p. 129 on the other hand tend to stress that there was an official Italian commercial agent at Meqele.

⁵⁰Informants: Bogale, Ibrahim, Hadera, Kase.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid; Informants further stated that until the end of the 19th century, Adi Qeibh was more important than Asmara as a market center and many traders used to return from Adi Qeibh.

⁵³Ibid; the Italians used to tell the negadrase "If you bring a large amount of products we will give you additional clothes, firearms and other prizes".

⁵⁴McCann, p. 129.

⁵⁵Pankhurst, Economic History, p. 372; Tekeste Negash, p. 41.

⁵⁶Informants: Kindeya, Belay, Kase, Hadera, Aregaw.

⁵⁷Ibid Pankhurst, Economic History, p. 390, Tekeste, p. 41.

¹Abdussamad, p. 49, Informant Aragaw.

²Informants Kase, Aregaw, Hadera, Annaratone, pp 410-411.

³All informants stress that the customs post of Addigrai was important owing to the notorious customs official called Girazmach Gefi.

⁴Marini, p. 410 Oral sources, however, simply say the amount of taxes were higher in Addigrai than Meqele.

⁵Although some informants state that Rag Gugs changed the market area to the south of Inda Aha Ananya it is believed that it remained in front of the Palace until the Italian period.

⁶Wylde, p.44; Berkeley, pp. 178-179.

⁷Marini, p. 168 & 549, Franchetti, p. 242, Alberto Pollera, Lo Stato Ehibipico E la sua chiesa (Roma: Societa editrice D'arte illustrata, 1926), p.85; Carlo Zaghi, Il diario inedito della spedizione capucci e ciognani all'aussa nel 1885 (Roma: Pressla R. Societa Geographica Italiana, 1935), p. 86-120; Annaratone, p. 87, Decastro, p. 259; Almagia, p. 67, Nesbitt, p. 440.

⁸Annaratone, p. 87; Decastro, p. 259.

⁹Annaratone, p. 87.

¹⁰Informants: Gebregziabihar, Gesese.

¹¹Mayer and Kohn, pp. 87-88, Eric. E. Lampard, "Urbanization and social change; on Broadening the scope and Relevance of Urban History" in the Historian and the city (eds.) Oscar Handlin and John Burchard (Cambridge: Mass. M.I.T. Press, 1963), p. 264.

¹²Robert E. Dickinson, City, Region and Regionalism: A Geographical Contribution to Human Ecology (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1947), p. 21.

¹³Tringham, p. 593.

¹⁴Informants: Ibrahim, Bayru, Kase as well as my observation.

¹⁵Ibid. Informants, Gebremikael, Hailemariam, Kahsay.

¹⁶Ibid. Informants, Ahmad, Abdulqadir.

¹⁷Informants: Amlesu, Medhin, Miraf. The dikum chaw was mostly exchanged for grain and pepper.

¹⁸McCann, p. 48.

⁷¹Informants: Sertsedingil, Woldayohanis Gebremedhin, Hailu Gebresillasie, Takele Desa, Bayru, Toklu, Bogale and others.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.; the three wenabirs were Wenber Abebe, Wenber Imam and Wenber Redda.

⁷⁴Informants: Zesilasie, Sertsedingil, Gebregiorgis, Girmay Meresa, Hagos, Liul.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶There were three Beris (kellas) from where the gedam collected toll-gate taxes. These were Beri Senuy, Beri Adi Shum Dihun and Beri Shiguashugi. Beri Senuy was collected from those who entered the town through the north and north-west, Beri Adi shum Dihun - from those came through the village of Adi Shum Dihun (generally through the west) and Beri Shiguashugi from the east and south-east.

⁷⁷All informants also state that the wives of the rim holders sometimes participated in the collection of items assessed by W/ro Lemlem

⁷⁸The income of the gedam was equally divided among the rim-holders except the ray tish, ray dilal and the income from the land sales.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid. Informant Liul himself was a lige mezemiran from 1925-1935.

⁸¹In the documents the transaction, the name of the guarantor, the witnesses, list of officials and the time is written. The main obstacle to our knowledge of land sales in space and time is that physical or geographical definition and the size of the units transferred are absent.

⁸²Crummey, p. 144.

⁸³Informants: Sertsedingil, Gesese

⁸⁴Trunningham, p. 593, Crumney, pp. 23-24

⁸⁵Informants: Kindeya, Burchiqo, Amlesu, Belay, Kase and others

⁸⁶Informants: Kindeya, Kase, Aregaw, Hadera.

⁸⁷Ibid

⁸⁸Ibid

⁸⁹Ibid. Informants: Gesese, Bayru, Hallu

⁹⁹Ibid. Dubale Taim first came to Meqele town as a long-distance trader from Gondar.

¹⁰⁰Tr 1 nqham, p. 845

¹⁰¹Informants: Gebremikael, Bogale, Gebreyohannis

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid.; Informant Toklu.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.; Informants Kindeya, Belay, Ibrahim.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Breese, p. 80.

¹⁰⁷Informants: Asreschegn, Binaga, Abraha, Hadish.

¹⁰⁸Roberto Almagia, Geografia Antropica Ed Economica - L'Africa Orientale in Reale Società Geografia Italiana (Bologna: Zanichelli Editore, 1938), p. 222.

¹⁰⁹Guida, p. 302; Informant: Qalekristos (he said he found the population number in an old document which he could not recall it now).

¹¹⁰Informants: Kindeya, Belay, Toklu, Bayru, Abdulqadir, Barbe.

¹¹¹Mayer and Kohn, p. 87; Bentu Getahun, "A History of Shashamane from its foundation to 1974" M.A. thesis in history (A.A.U., 1988), p. 62.

¹¹²Informants: Birhigo, Medhin, Amlesu, Tibebe, Miraf, Abdulqadir.

¹¹³Ibid.; the markets held in the compounds of the mesheta houses were often called Idaga Agaw i.e. Agaw market

¹¹⁴The waste product of the pack animals was also useful for fire and greatly helped the mesheta business owners

¹¹⁵Informants: Kabsay, Kase, Hattu.

¹¹⁶Informants: Birhigo, Amlesu, Tibebe. The day kurtum was sometimes paid in kind i.e. galls, aregi etc.

¹¹⁷The unpublished written document entitled "Meqele ke 1900-1928", p. 8; Informants: Toklu, Gebregziabihar, Hadish. Geese. They further state that Abraha was given to the Italians in exchange for firearms by his brother Debeh, he then went to Torino (Italy) where he lived for sometime

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁷Ibid. Al Fio Russo The Italians In Macalle N.D.N.P.H. P. 115. states that the house of clanis (Greek) was like a European house, two storeyed and with a garden

¹¹⁸Informats Amlesu, Gehregziabihar, Gesese, Birchigo

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰Ibid.

¹²¹Ibid., Informants Bogale, Kase Aregaw Gebremikael.

¹²²Ibid

¹²³Informants Birchigo and kindeya stated that the women (and Mainly prostitutes) of Meqeie used to sing songs in order to attract the foreigners songs such as

እንድ ገምጦ ጠላ እንድ ገምጦ ጠጅ
በዓቱ ሃበኝ ባባቱ ፈረንጅ
የጦቀሉ ሸጋ ባዩሮ ነው እንደ።

one galon of tella and one gallon of lej
His mother is Habesha and his father ferenji
It is Baraye which is the beauty of Meqeie

¹²⁴R. Pankhurst, "The History of Prostitution In Ethiopia". In Journal of Ethiopian Studies, v 12 n.1 (H.S.I V, 1974), p 76

¹²⁵Most informants agree on this point.

¹²⁶Informants: Kindeya, Sensesdingil

¹²⁷Ibid., Informant: Bogale

¹²⁸Informants Bayru, Toklu, Gesese, Hadish

¹²⁹Ibid.

CONCLUSION

This study has been mainly in the nature of a historical survey of Meqele town, 1872-1935. Meqele had its genesis as a religious settlement beginning from the fourteenth century. From that time until the nineteenth century, it was noted for the churches of Inda Masqal, Indayesus and the ritual site of Inda Abba Anenya. The fertile and forested hills of the locality was attractive as a place of seclusion for the monastic communities. Besides, Meqele had a natural beauty which attracted powerful rulers of the area like Ras Woldesillasie who used to frequent the area and to attend religious ceremonies.

However, it was during the reign of Emperor Yohannis that Meqele rose to political and economic prominence. Two years before his coronation, the emperor ordered the construction of a gedam in the area and encouraged church men to settle around it. This led to the emergence of a sizable settlement. Indeed, later developments show that the gedam played a prominent role in the socio-economic life of the town.

Moreover, Yohannis chose Meqele as his capital and constructed a large palace around 1884. Like the gedam the palace became a node of settlement for his entourage. Furthermore he established a weekly market and encouraged and sometimes forced women and Muslim communities of the surrounding areas to settle around the market as traders.

However, after the death of Emperor Yohannis, new developments took place in northern Ethiopia which were to have some negative repercussions on the town. The

unstable situation which reigned in Tigray after 1889 and the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1895-96 are two good cases in point. The successor to the throne, Ras Mengesha Yohannis, had his own political problems and the attention he could give to Meqele was slight. As a result, until the end of the nineteenth century, the size as well as the pattern of settlement which had emerged during the reign of Emperor Yohannis was to remain almost unchanged.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the growth of Meqele town took a different turn. The new governor, Dejazmach Abraha Araya, built a new place to the south of the town which eventually led to the emergence of another town with in walking distance of Meqele proper. Abraha established his own gedam and a market place and worked hard to weaken Meqele town. Like Emperor Yohannis, he brought muslims and women traders to the new settlement. In the long run, his efforts contributed to the emergence of quarters in and around Meqele town.

The importance of the town established by Abraha was short-lived and his successor Seyoum Mengesha made Meqele proper his center. Seyoum directed his efforts to the renewal of the palace of Emperor Yohannis. But the contributions he made to the growth of the town was minimal. A steady growth of the town took place after the 1920's with the coming of Ras Gugsa Araya to the governorship of Eastern Tigray. Ras Gugsa constructed Mariam church and distributed land to many of his followers to the south of it. He also encouraged people to build houses and actively involve in local as well as long-distance trade. At this time Meqele showed both qualitative and quantitative growth.

This study has tried to show that Meqele combined the three institutions which helped shape Ethiopian towns in the nineteenth century. These were the palace, the market and the church, which played their own respective political, economic and cultural roles. They were interrelated but had varying degrees of importance in the growth of the town.

It has emerged that from its inception Meqele was a market center. The town had a unique character as a distribution center of salt bars for the larger part of the country. Since salt was one of the main features of Indertian economy it tied the town with its surroundings. Thus, the first important premise with regard to the evolution and growth of Meqele town is that it was at the center of both the salt trade and the people who kept this trade in motion. This in turn attracted long-distance traders and became the basic factor for much of the growth and development of Meqele's trade with the different parts of the country.

The town became a point of articulation for the agricultural products of the south and imported goods which came from the colony of Eritrea. This made the residents of the town as well as the local elite draw their source of income from a wider area. In the last years of our period Meqele was able to draw the attention of both local and long-distance traders. The development of trade and the close relationship with the Italian colony of Eritrea brought about the emergence and expansion of big commercial establishments, modern houses and catering services and the diversification of the economy of the town.

Generally speaking, Meqele evolved as a religious settlement, gained importance as a political center, developed as a salt market and expanded when it began to serve as a transit point for long-distance trade. Therefore it could not be an exaggeration to say that if Emperor Yohannis gave the first impulse of life to Meqele town, it was the salt trade which kept it going. This, coupled with the intermediate role the town played between the south and the colony of Enitrea, as well as the surplus accumulation of the local elite, resulted in the growth of Meqele town ■ an urban center

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